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Captain's Log

A personal plea, if you're a *Stranger Things* fan that's picked up this issue because your favourite show is included – please don't scan or take pictures of the magazine and post them online. You might not think it's a big deal, but it really damages our sales and makes it even harder to keep *SFX* going. Anything that we want to share, we'll do so from our official channels. Then we can do it all again when *Tales From '85* comes out next year!

Stranger Things aside, we've got an extremely packed issue this month – including *four* set visit reports. Ooh, it's like the good old days of magazines! One of my very favourite shows returns, as it only can at this time of year, *A Ghost Story For Christmas*, plus *Doctor Who* is back (sort of) with some fishy goings on.

Then there's a whole bunch of exclusive interviews for blockbuster movies too! Whatever you think about the internet, YouTube, TikTok or wherever you get news – there's fewer outlets than ever doing things like this, so please support the magazines you love so that we don't lose them. A subscription to *SFX* makes a lovely present...

Thank you to each and every one of you that's picked up a copy of *SFX* in 2025, our 30th anniversary year. Can you believe it's been 30 years? And that issue 400 is next month? No pressure...

Incidentally, happy holidays to all of you at home!

Darren x

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Wicked: For Good* goes hard. It's darker than the first part, and all the better for it.
→ Really excited for a new episode of *A Ghost Story For Christmas* – a rare occasion where I didn't get to go on set!
→ *Bugonia* rocks. That ending is *bleak*.

RANTS

→ I can't lie, this year – and in particular these last few issues – has really knocked the wind out of my sails. Hoping that a lot of *SFX* subscriptions make their way under the Christmas tree!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Only watched the first two episodes of *Pluribus* so far, but I *loved* them.
→ The trailer for Gore Verbinski's latest, *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die*, is fantastic. I'm really keen on seeing it now.
→ Dear Father Christmas: please can you leave a Radiophonic Workshop mug from shop.bbc.com in my stocking? Thanks.

RANTS

→ Watching *Buffy* episodes for Halloween has solidified my view that Xander is *not* the most toxic character. It's Willow! She wipes her girlfriend's memory – *twice!*

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Finally found the time to watch all five hours of *RoboDoc: The Creation Of Robocop*. An amazing documentary that truly does justice to an amazing movie!

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ London's Museum Of Brands is already one of my favourite places on Earth but its Gerry and Sylvia Anderson exhibition really sent me to retro heaven.
→ I thought I'd be fatigued by yet another retelling of *Frankenstein*, but del Toro nailed it. Stunning visuals and a truly remarkable performance by Jacob Elordi.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Go see Bryan Fuller's *Dust Bunny*. It's a delightfully demented family movie of the sort everyone laments no one makes now.
→ Wonderful to have Vince Gilligan back making a darkly comedic, thoughtful genre series with Apple TV's *Pluribus*.

RANTS

→ Love to see every corner of the *Star Wars* fandom castigating the terrible Disney suits' decision to kill a fully-developed Soderbergh/Driver collab.

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The ghost of *A Diva's Christmas Carol*.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Love Like Blood

The greatest vampire of all finds true romance in Luc Besson's **Dracula**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I DON'T LIKE HORROR films," confesses Luc Besson, the writer and director of the latest resurrection of the screen's most unslayable vampire. "They're too scary!"

So don't be too quick to label his *Dracula*, which stars Caleb Landry Jones as a passionate, obsessive immortal searching for a lost love.

"I don't think of it as a horror film. Not at all. It's a pure romance. I think that *Léon* is much more frightening than *Dracula*!"

Besson's career encompasses everything from that '90s hitman thriller to the dazzling futurescapes of *The Fifth Element* and *Valerian And The City Of A Thousand Planets*. Now he brings a visionary eye to Bram Stoker's seminal novel.

"I read it again before making the movie," the French filmmaker says. "The book is heavy and big, too long for me. I'm not a big reader. The book is a monument and you're inspired by that. I have a lot of respect for the book."

For Besson, Dracula's undead heart isn't just there to be staked. "A man, able to wait 400 years because he wants to say goodbye to his wife... I thought it was terribly romantic, and that's the only story I wanted to tell. In fact, I think the movie is closer to *Beauty And The Beast*."

Besson says he's not daunted by the decades of Draculas – many legitimately iconic – that precede his take. "I don't care. I don't care at all. If you put a model in the middle of a room, and then around the model you put Modigliani,

Waltz plays a priest hellbent on finding Dracula.

Dracula and his reincarnated love walk the streets of Paris.

Jones and Bleu share plenty of intimate moments.

Dracula's castle and the gravesite of his eternal love.

Soutine, Picasso and Raphael, no one will make the same painting, even if it's the same model. And you know what? I presume that all these paintings will be amazing! I don't have the talent of those guys, but I take my pencil and I try to make my painting."

Besson cast Jones in 2023's *Dogman* and was inspired to make *Dracula* as a showcase for the Texan actor. "He can play everything. He has an absolute access to himself. He can open himself up and give everything. Since the day we met, we really connected, and he wasn't scared. He trusts me. He knows I only want good things from him."

We first see Jones as Romanian warrior-nobleman Prince Vlad, who renounces god after the death of his beloved Elisabeta (Zoë Bleu). Searching for her reincarnation across the centuries, he finally comes to 19th-century Paris – a striking relocation from Stoker's London and Whitby.

"Don't be offended," chuckles Besson. "I apologise to the English because yes, it's true, I've moved it! The book is the book, but when it comes to the movie you have this triangle, which is the priest looking for Dracula and Dracula looking for his wife. Then we have the castle in Romania. It's really not practical to be in London – there's the sea, you have to take a boat. It makes the logistics very complex, and it doesn't bring anything to my storytelling.

"I said, 'Okay, let's find a city on the continent where you can go to Romania by train or by horse in two days.' I had a little list: Paris, Rome, Venice, Barcelona, and I studied them to see what was going on at this time. I realised you have the centenary of the French Revolution, and as a scriptwriter that's interesting because you can have a huge fair. Now we need to catch him in the middle of a huge party. It really brings something."

Christoph Waltz is the priest on Dracula's bloody trail across Europe. It's a character who fulfils the traditional function of the Count's human nemesis, but one who goes without a familiar name. "I was not trying to portray Van Helsing," says Besson, "so why call him Van Helsing?

"What was interesting is that you have science and religion. Religion is supposed to be a proposition. Science is something we know. I really wanted to reverse that. The priest is very sure of himself and basically knows everything when the science is lost. I wanted to play that exchange of knowledge."

Also out is the customary harem of vampiric brides in Castle Dracula, replaced by a troupe of living gargoyles. "In the book he has like three nymphs, which is very disturbing to me, because my love story is really unique – he loves one woman and no one else. So I was not comfortable having nymphets in the castle!

"Society today is so cynical. We need to hear that love still exists. And artists are here for that, to throw some bottles in the sea and remind people, just for two hours."

> **"The book is a monument and you're inspired by that"**

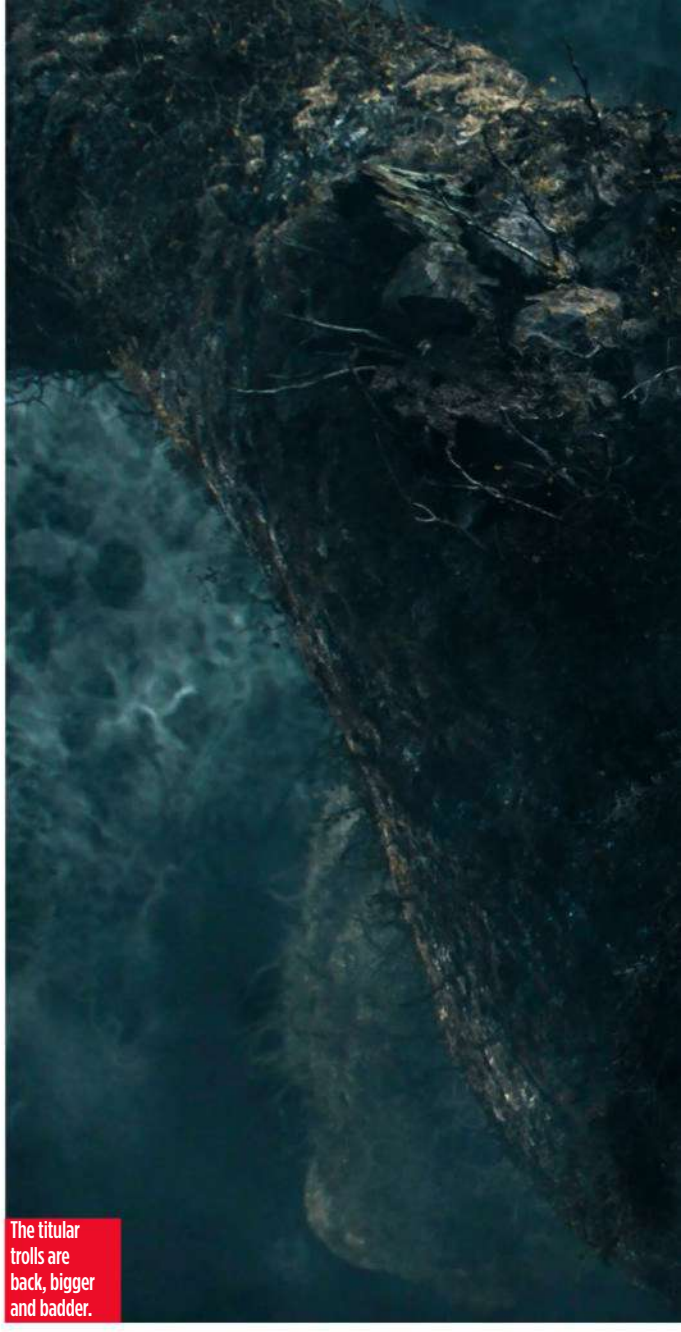
Dracula is available digitally on 1 December and on Blu-ray/DVD on 22 December.

SCI-FACT! **Iguanas were among the visual inspirations for the appearance of an aged Dracula.**

The cast were all thrilled to return for the sequel.

Great care was taken in designing a new troll.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE



The titular trolls are back, bigger and badder.

Scandi Crush

Global hit **Troll** gets a new chapter, with a tag team of testy trolls ready to rumble

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

YOU SHOULD NEVER underestimate the power of a monster movie. When creatures go smash, audiences show up in droves, be it Godzilla or an unknown Norwegian giant ready to crush Oslo in director Roar Uthaug's 2022 Netflix feature *Troll*.

According to the company's stats, *Troll* remains the streamer's most-viewed non-English film of all time, a fact that still floors the director. "We were not expecting that at all," Uthaug tells Red Alert. "We were making a small troll movie based on the creatures from our fairy tales and folklore that we grew up with. To be able to take that very Norwegian mythology and create a movie that resonated in such a huge way, we were really blown away by that."

Uthaug says that during *Troll*'s postproduction, he already had ideas for a sequel. "I was starting to think of how I would love to expand on that mythology and that universe, and how I would love to continue the arcs of these characters. After we saw how huge the movie became, then we started talking about, 'Okay, what if we made the sequel?'"

Troll 2 is the next chapter, set two years after the first, and reunites a now-disillusioned Nora Tidemann (Ine Marie Wilmann) with the Troll Alliance team who helped save Oslo in the first film.

"I thought it was fun to see that Nora has kind of become her dad," Uthaug says of the palaeontologist, who has holed up by herself to become a Norwegian folklore expert. "She's moved into his place, is wearing his clothes and his conspiracy-theorist ways have seeped into her." Former advisor to the Prime Minister Andreas Isaksen (Kim S Falck-Jørgensen) arrives, begging her to return with him to see a secret – they've excavated a giant "megatroll" in hibernation.

Uthaug confirms that, along with Nora and Andreas, the main cast from *Troll* also return in this sequel. "All the actors were really excited to come back," he says. "But I wanted also to start them off in surprising ways so that we don't feel like time has stood still while we've been away, that something has been going on between these two movies. They have new motivations for why they do this, so it's not just like all the characters patting each other on the back. They come into it with a new kind of force.

> **"During Troll's postproduction, he already had ideas for a sequel"**

"We also have a lot more humour in this movie than we had in the first one," he notes. "And we're trying to expand on the adventure part of it. It's not just a pure monster movie, but there's this action-adventure thing too."

Shooting again took place on location in Norway, and Uthaug says the sequel showcases his

The beauty of Norway makes for a perfect backdrop.

native country even more than the original, making it an epic backdrop for the reawakening of an alpha troll and a younger troll who meet for the first time on the frozen tundra.

"We have to be clever about how to use our money, and we have all these big, beautiful vistas and landscapes out there; they're free production value," he chuckles. "So instead of building huge sets that they can do on a big movie, we take our crew and our characters and put them into these huge natural environments, and that gives us a lot of scale."

The locale also amplifies both films' ongoing conversation about humans and their impact on the natural world. "The first movie is about what we do to nature and how we exploit it, and how it hits back," he says. "The sequel also talks a little bit about, who does the land belong to? Who was here first? How do we coexist? How can we, even though we have different views, find common ground?"

And then it's also about two massive trolls crushing human infrastructure as they battle for their territory! Though it's a relatively modest action film, *Troll 2*'s creatures look better than the visual effects featured in some major blockbusters. Uthaug says that he worked with four effects houses to bring these upgraded creatures to life with a lot of thought and specificity. "Because we now have two trolls, it was important that they each have their own personality," he explains. "We worked a lot on that from the very beginning of designing them with our concept artists."

When asked if a *Troll* trilogy now seems feasible, Uthaug is optimistic. "When we did this sequel, we didn't have any plans for a third. But as we started wrapping it up, I started to see where it could go next, and it's a universe I love being in."

Troll 2 is on Netflix now.

SCI-FACT! **The villain troll took inspiration from wolves and predators. The hero troll draws from softer animals and looks more human.**

SCI-FACT! **Created by James Robinson and Steve Dillon, the Witches' Road first appeared in 2016's *Scarlet Witch* issue three.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Wiccan will embrace being Sorcerer Supreme of All.

This series is the first time that Billy has gone it alone.

Hulkling is still suffering the fallout of *Imperial*.

Peculiar Path

Wiccan's first miniseries takes him off the beaten track on the Witches' Road WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

THE REINCARNATED SON OF THE Scarlet Witch and the Vision, Billy Kaplan first appeared as a Young Avenger in 2001. Now, nearly two and a half decades later, Wiccan is starring in his first, five-issue miniseries, in which he travels the mythical Witches' Road, following in the footsteps of his television counterpart – as played by Joe Locke – in last year's *Agatha All Along*.

"Billy's a wonderfully rich character with so many aspects that have been left unexplored," writer Wyatt Kennedy tells Red Alert. "But the thing that attracted me most was getting to put him front and centre of the story. It's no secret that he has what one could generously call a 'complicated' backstory, especially given his power set, so I wanted to start him from a low point and watch him work his way up to being a hero worthy of the magical mantle he carries. He's very funny and chatty, but the empathy and kindness he's carried from the numerous experiences he's faced was what I really wanted to display."

Along with Teddy Altman, aka Hulkling – who is seriously injured after the conclusion of the recent intergalactic event series *Imperial* – Billy is also part of a super-powered married couple. "I don't want to give too much away, but Hulkling's place in the story is a lot of fun and quite morbid," teases Kennedy. "He's Billy's better half and during a lot of the toughest and darkest times he's there to help prop him back up, the same way Billy's there for Teddy after the fallout of *Imperial*. I wanted to maintain the love they have, but also realistically explore what it's like to be in such a massively transitional space and where they'll find their

Billy and Teddy will face some challenges.

next home. They're struggling, but they're doing it together."

While Kennedy hints that "when I started developing the story, I was less drawn to the Witches' Road as a literal concept than I was to it as a metaphorical one," he declines to provide too many details about his interpretation of the mysterious, mystical dimension. "This is Billy's journey to reclaim something that he's lost and a journey to expand his magical knowledge, and that definitely comes with encountering magical characters in the Marvel universe that he's never met before – some friend, some foe and some right in-between," he says, although we can confirm that Billy will face a new adversary.

> **"This is Billy's journey to regain something that he's lost and expand his magical knowledge"**

"Those who've been following the character for a while now know of his status as the Demiurge, and we'll be diving right into that," adds Kennedy, referring to how Billy is the Sorcerer Supreme of All.

Remarking that "when I first conceived the story I wanted to ground it in the gothic horror and dark fantasy that I've always loved from literature and videogames," Kennedy is enjoying working with artist Andy Pereira. "His action is dynamic, his interpretation of settings are beautiful," he says. "I'm very excited for people to see how he depicts Billy, who may or may not be receiving a new look – I've said too much!"

Wiccan: Witches' Road is out on 3 December.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Journey Into Mystery

Doctor Strange travels to the Nine Realms after becoming Sorcerer Supreme of Asgard

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CUT OFF FROM EARTH following recent events in *Thor*, Doctor Strange – now Sorcerer Supreme of Asgard – leaves his adopted home behind in his new monthly title, venturing out into the Nine Realms.

"We've expanded our approach, which allows us to deal with ideas that sprang from our last miniseries," says writer Derek Landy, referring to the recent *Doctor Strange Of Asgard*. "Strange's motives weren't the purest when vying for the mantle of Sorcerer Supreme, so now we have that thread intertwined with the threat he's now facing and the threat he's about to face beyond it. We started off with a nice little murder mystery, and now we're dealing with impossible villains on a cosmic scale – which is a pretty standard transition for Stephen Strange to make."

With Landy admitting, "I have a thing about twisting the knife – as in twisting the knife after you've stabbed someone elicits a different reaction," Strange has to master a whole different skill set as he gets to grips with his Asgardian magical abilities. "The plot calls for Strange to adopt a new set of magical patrons, but the fun comes in figuring out the drawbacks and the compromises he has to make to deal with all of this," he explains. "He managed to become Sorcerer Supreme of Asgard, so he still knows what he's doing, but because he's so far removed from his comfort zone, and lacking the back-up he's used to, he needs to compensate in other areas."

Strange isn't entirely on his own as, with Landy unable to use Loki due to *Thor* writer Al Ewing's plans, he teams up with celestial bounty hunter Angela. "Strange is a fish out of water, so he needs a companion to act as a guide," says Landy, who also explores the workings of Heven and Angelic society.

"We know there is a Queen of the Angels, but is that the same thing as Queen of Heven, and how do the Hierophants fit into the governing structure and who has authority?" he continues, emphasising that Strange's main aim remains to return home.

"It's up to Angela to make him understand that if his head isn't in this particular game then he runs the very real risk of losing them both," adds Landy. "The conflict between the hero that Strange is and the temptation to shirk his responsibilities in order to get back to his loved ones is tremendously exciting. We filter that exploration through the threats and obstacles he faces, and light elf wizards, new kinds of magic and skies filled with enemies are the kinds of things Stephen Strange was born to fight."

Landy says he knew the elements he wanted in Geoff Shaw's new costume design, such as "turning the symbol on Strange's torso into Yggdrasil the World Tree", and is impressed with artist Ivan Fiorelli. "We travel from Asgard to Alfheim, Heven, Svartalalfheim and Vanaheim in the first few issues alone," he says. "Strange comments that every Realm is more beautiful than the last, and that comes directly from Ivan's artwork."

Doctor Strange is out on 3 December.

Doctor Strange will take in Asgard and beyond.

SCI-FACT! **Landy originally planned to have Strange and Loki travel the Nine Realms as "a magically powered Holmes and Watson".**

This is theatre, but probably not as you've seen it before.

PICTURES BY JOHAN PERSSON

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Let The Games Begin

The Hunger Games: On Stage producer Tristan Baker brings Panem to the theatre

WORDS: **MATT MAYTUM**

THE HUNGER GAMES has joined the likes of *Back To The Future*, *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Stranger Things* as the latest screen property to get a blockbuster adaptation on the London stage. Are the odds in its favour? Producer Tristan Baker certainly thinks so.

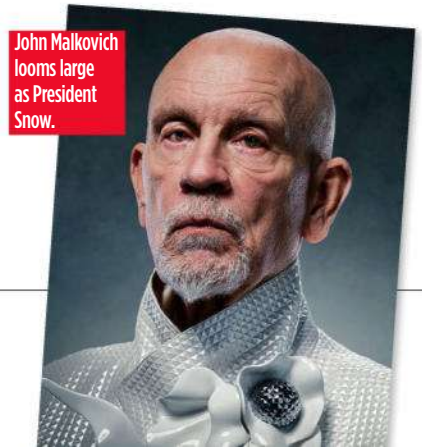
Paying, ahem, tribute to both Suzanne Collins's original YA dystopian novel and the hit 2012 Lionsgate film it inspired, *The Hunger Games: On Stage* is wildly ambitious, requiring a purpose-built space in London's Canary Wharf. Having co-founded both production company Runaway Entertainment and Troubadour Theatres and Film Studios (which builds theatre and film event spaces such as Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre, home to *Starlight Express*), Baker seems uniquely positioned to bring *The Hunger Games: On Stage* to life.

It all began with Baker speaking to Lionsgate seven years ago. "They were saying, 'Look, we think *The Hunger Games* could make a great stage event. It could be a fantastic story to tell in a theatrical sense,'" he tells Red Alert. He began assembling a team of previous collaborators, including writer Conor McPherson (Bob Dylan jukebox musical *Girl From The North Country*) and director Matthew Dunster (*2:22 A Ghost Story*). Among the other notable talent involved are set designer Miriam Buether (*Stranger Things: The First Shadow*) and illusion designer Chris Fisher (*Harry Potter And The Cursed Child*).

Reassuringly for fans of the series, author Collins worked closely with McPherson on his adaptation. "He worked with Suzanne all the way through," says Baker, "so obviously they were looking at the book, but they also looked at the film because it's a great adaptation. He used both [book and film] as his source material and Suzanne as a source material." Because there have been two further prequel novels since the OG trilogy, Baker promises "lots of Easter eggs... and of course, that was all through Suzanne."

> **"We are pushing the boundaries of live theatre"**

If you're familiar with the story, you'll know that *The Hunger Games* is set in a dystopian future in North America, now called Panem and consisting of 12 districts. Each year, two youngsters from each district are selected by lottery to participate in the games – a battle to the death in



John Malkovich looms large as President Snow.

Mia Carragher rarely leaves the stage as Katniss.

Peeta and Katniss share a moment. Aww.

It looks like the show will stay true to the spirit of the story.

The theatre has been purpose-built for the production.

an enormous arena. The sole survivor will win riches for their district, and the televised spectacle is intended to keep the masses in their place. No wonder a story like this couldn't be told in a standard theatrical setting.

"It's not a traditional theatre," says Baker. "You're in the round and the seating banks move while you are in them. You go from the round to traverse [the audience seated on two sides of the stage] for various scenes. So the seating banks move, there's automation, there's all sorts of effects, performer-flying stunts, and also this incredible, beautiful story that Suzanne Collins created originally.

"The whole thing is ambitious, and at the heart of it you've got this incredible [concept]: they're putting kids to war for sport," Baker continues. "Then there's some amazing set-pieces in the show. Obviously there's the chariot parade. There's the actual fighting. There's when all the fire comes and chases Katniss up the trees and the whole place is on fire – we do that. There's so many elements of it that we're creating in a theatrical way, but pushing the boundaries of live theatre."

Casting was "a real process", given that they needed performers who could not only handle the acting, but also the physical demands. Relative newcomer Mia Carragher plays protagonist Katniss, the rebel who poses a threat to the government from the moment she volunteers as tribute to take part in the games in place of her younger sister. The movie role launched Jennifer Lawrence to superstardom. "Mia is never off stage as Katniss," says Baker. "It's the most incredible tour de force performance."

Another intriguing piece of casting is John Malkovich, who will appear on screen as President Snow, taking advantage of the show's screens and AV components. "Connor and Matthew thought that President Snow – because he's actually in the first book very little – could be a sort of presence from the Capitol," says Baker. "It doesn't have to be him in real life... And when you list all of those people that could play Snow at that time in his life with the presence and the scariness, there's only a couple of names that come to mind, and John Malkovich was at the top of it."

Of course, there are a further two books/films to complete Katniss's story, and Baker doesn't rule out adapting those too. "Anything can happen, he says. "We've done the first book. There's lots more books to come if people love it and, it seems to be they're loving it, and they want to see the story continued... Who knows what could happen? It has that 'to be continued' element. But it is a very full [story], it has its own resolution." How do you like those odds?

The Hunger Games: On Stage is booking now at thehungergamesonstage.com.

SCI-FACT! **The next *Hunger Games* movie – an adaptation of Haymitch's prequel story *Sunrise On The Reaping* – releases November 2026.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Legend Reborn

The videogame heroine returns in **Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Lara's pal Sam Nishimura (left) is along for the ride.

THE FIRST SEASON OF Netflix's animated series *Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft* had this version of the iconic videogame heroine (voiced by Hayley Atwell) globe-trotting for mystical artefacts, outwitting a "Big Bad" peer named Charles Devereaux (Richard Armitage) and even taking out a Tyrannosaurus in a season finale fight. All of which begs the question: where do you *possibly* take Lara Croft next?

Luckily, lifelong Croft aficionado and series creator Tasha Huo tells Red Alert that season two is brimming with new locales and challenges for the antiquities seeker, as well as a crisis of purpose.

Croft's whole mission comes under question when she meets the formidable Mila (Tricia Helfer), a billionaire visionary out to "save the world" through her company, Pithos. One of their major initiatives is ethical archaeology, where cultural artefacts are returned to their rightful owners, something that she asks of Croft. But can she trust that Mila's intent is honourable, or are there ulterior motives?

> **"There are always more stories to tell with Lara"**

"As a fan of the games, I love the female villains like Jacqueline Natla," Huo says, referencing the *Tomb Raider* game franchise's villain/Atlantean queen. "So I wanted to create my own version of that [with Mila] and Fig [Marisha Ray], who is her second-in-command. It was really fun to get to add to this great tradition that Crystal Dynamics has of these strong, powerful, frightening women who exist in *Tomb Raider* to challenge Lara in really unique ways."

Huo says that she also appreciates a villain who makes the audience understand their motivations and maybe even empathise with them, citing Thanos in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. "A lot of work was put into what does Mila really feel about the world?" Huo explains. "Where is her pain? Why has she become the villain, because villains aren't just created in a vacuum. There's something that happened to this woman to make her feel like she needs to act in this way. Hopefully that comes through in the show, that there is a deeper-rooted, personal reason behind why she is going after Lara, and all these things."

Helping her uncover Mila's secrets are trusted allies from the games, Jonah Maiava (Earl Baylon), Zip (Allen Maldonado), and old friend Sam Nishimura (Karen Fukuhara). After a season of accepting that she needs a circle around her to succeed, Huo says the second season has Croft learning how to incorporate those

Lara is at large – but isn't going it alone.

There are frequent nods to the videogames.

Turns out that raiding tombs has its consequences.

Expect weird and wonderful new locations.

Earl Baylon is Māori character Jonah Maiava.

Looks like there'll be no lack of action.

friends into her life. "To start to rely on people is very difficult for someone who is so fiercely independent," she points out. "But for a show where we're trying to tell a more human story, a part of her arc is saying, 'Hey, maybe I don't always have the right answer. Maybe I need to have a community of people behind me.'"

In travelling to new destinations like New Orleans, Brazil and Cuba, Huo says audiences will also come to know more of Croft's distant allies. "One of the things I really loved in playing the videogame was how Lara Croft has these secret communities all over the world," Huo explains. "People she seemingly had adventures with off-camera somewhere, and she relies on them to provide information, to provide housing, all these different things as she goes around the world. A big part of season two is building one small part of that community for her, so we can see what *was* going on behind the scenes."

It could almost be a level from one of the games.

Another aspect of the appeal of Lara in this series remains Atwell's commitment to voice all the layers to this heroine. "She's always so good at finding the real emotion in something, which I think is why she really responded to *Tomb Raider*," Huo says of her star. "Because as crazy and wild and fantastical as it can get as an action adventure show, at its heart, she knows she's telling the story of a woman who is struggling to have friends, to rely on people and to grow as a woman into someone who is more emotionally healthy. There's a lot of Lara figuring herself out in this season. And in having conversations with Sam, as well as with Mila, I think Hayley really brought a lot of authentic feelings to those moments.

"She's also insanely good at the action," she continues. "Coming off *Mission: Impossible*, she knows exactly what this action scene sounds like, and gives us different versions of that."

While Netflix gave *Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft* a two-season order, Huo is hopeful audience support will get them more. "We'll see by the end where it takes us," she says, regarding the numbers for season two. "There are always more stories to tell with Lara. It's never a closed book."

Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft is on Netflix from 11 December.

SCI-FACT! ***Black Widow*** **and** ***The Handmaid's Tale*****'s O-T Fagbenle voices the new character of Eshu; like the actor, the character is Nigerian.**

SCI-FACT! ***Deadline*** **originally ran from 1988 to 1995, while** ***A1*** **encompassed two volumes from 1989 to 1992.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Mighty Merger

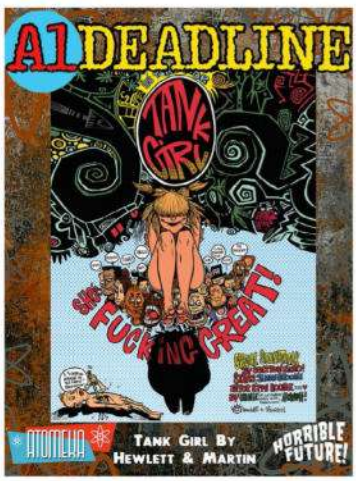
Great News For All Readers! ’80s anthologies join forces to become **A1Deadline**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Obviously we condemn this satire wholeheartedly.

LOOKING TO DO SOMETHING creative after “the tumultuous time” of Covid, Dave Elliott “kind of fell down a rabbit hole, trying to figure out what *Deadline* would mean now” after being given the rights to the defunct, anarchic comics magazine, which he once edited for its former publisher, Tom Astor.

After being told by another creator that “if he ever revived *A1* again, they’d love to do a story for it” – referring to the prestigious anthology series that Elliott also edited and published – “that little interaction wormed its way inside my head and sparked an idea,” he says. “Why not merge *A1* and *Deadline*? I’d co-created one and worked on the other. I approached *Deadline* in a similar fashion to *A1* and started to expand it from being a purely UK-based publication to bring in creators from elsewhere. Merging the two titles felt like I was picking up where I left off.”



Along with the return of Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett’s Tank Girl, there are also posthumous contributions from former *Deadline* editors Steve Dillon and Brett Ewins and Elliott’s former *A1* partner, Garry Leach.

Now best known for strips like *2000 AD*’s “The Fall Of Deadworld”, Kek-W first broke into comics in the early ’90s after striking up a friendship with writer Shaky Kane, having admired his strips like “A-Men” in *Deadline*. “In a weird, roundabout way, it was *Deadline* that caused me to shift from submitting work to indie publications to writing professionally,” he recalls. “Roughly in parallel to that, Shaky asked me if I had any ideas we could submit to *Deadline*. I wrote some short strips and one-pagers, some of which Shaky may have illustrated. Shaky said the page rate was really low at that point as a lot of their money was going on legal costs for the *Tank Girl* film, but it was fun to work up some weirder, more oddball material that wouldn’t have been accepted by *2000 AD*. The “Cap’n Dinosaur” strip we’ve done for *A1Deadline* has a daft *Deadline*-ish vibe, so now I’d love to do something that has more of an A1 edge to it.

Other strips in the 80-pager include “Self-Aware In Aisle 5” by Mark Schey and artist Eryk Donovan. “I grew up very aware of A1 and *Deadline*, not just because of Tank Girl, but because they represented something bigger,” says Schey. “My story shares that same DNA, updated for the world we live in now. It looks at what happens when we invite corporations into our homes and how ageing, health and technology reshape who we are. It’s part sci-fi, part satire and part autobiography. It’s a deeply personal story for me, but simultaneously a reflection of what we’ve collectively become since the original *Deadline*.”

Elsewhere, artist Alison Sampson teams up with writer Fred Van Lente on “The Beard”. “The premise of this story just makes you laugh,” she says. “Yes, we have a body hair comic, and it’s in *A1Deadline*. A woman gets a beard and it gives her superpowers. It’s very funny, and you probably have to read it.”

A1Deadline Special is out next year.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Future Foundation

Marvel's **The End: 2099** leads to a new start for Spider-Man 2099

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE THE 22ND CENTURY WAS over 100 years in the distance when *Spider-Man 2099* debuted in 1992, it's now less than 75 years away, which is partly why Marvel is bringing their near-future line to a close with this five-parter – leading to the introduction of *Spider-Man 3099*.

"Logically, it hasn't literally been the year 2099 for folks like Miguel O'Hara for a long time, unless he's been speed-running all his adventures to the extreme," laughs writer Steve Orlando. "As for *The End: 2099*, as we've seen, conceptually, in fiction, ends are times of change and even the apocalypse is often contextualised as a paradigm shift."

With the Age of Heroes having concluded with 2024's *Annihilation 2099*, Mephisto pits its leading protagonists against a range of characters from across the multiverse. "It'll be the icons that folks will be most excited to see again and the characters who'll best challenge the Age of Heroes of 2099," explains Orlando. "So we'll see how the *Age Of Apocalypse* Wolverine contrasts with Nova 2099, who is also a version of Logan, and how the classic Claremont/Byrne Cyclops and Jean Grey contrast with 2099's more antagonistic though still fiercely loyal Cyclops and Phoenix. You'll definitely see characters that aren't X-Men. In fact, you'll see a character reaching all the way back to 1961's *Fantastic Four* issue one along with Mayday Parker and even Miles Morales, as ripped from *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*. This is a love letter to Marvel history, a celebration of its present and a send-up for its future."

Having collaborated on *Annihilation 2099*, Orlando praises artist Ibraim Roberson. "His depiction of 2099 is so unique," he says. "It's futuristic, but not sterile. It's lived-in, tactile. Ibraim envisions a future that's an extrapolation of our own, but his tiny gestures and details still make it feel like the world outside our window, which to me, is speculative fiction."

While Orlando compares 2099 "broadly speaking" to cyberpunk "so it's like *Blade Runner*", *Spider-Man 3099* more resembles *Foundation*. "It takes the Marvel universe into the next century – and every century needs a Spider-Man and, in fact, this century this needs a Spider-Man more than ever!" he teases. "When the Spider-Man of 3099 meets Miguel, never mind Miles and Mayday, he's not even aware he's not the first Spider-Man. While the heroes of 2099 are often aware they're picking up the baton, by the time we reach 3099 that's no longer the case. By 3099, history has been privatised and commodified in favour of the future's kingmakers and deciders. 3099 isn't about the carrying on, but the reincarnation of a legacy and the rebirth of heroism. Spider-Man 3099 takes up the suit to stand up for the little guy, just like, but not inspired by Peter Parker, as the people of 3099 have no idea about the previous heroic ages. So when Spider-Man 3099 discovers hints of what came before our event, it's not just surprising for him – it's empowering. He finally finds out he's not in the fight alone, and in fact he never has been."

The End: 2099 is out on 10 December.

Abyssyus – a Knull-infected Galactus – looms large.

Meet Spider-Man 3099 – looks like the red suit is out.

SCI-FACT! **Spider-Man 2099 debuted in 1992's *Amazing Spider-Man* 365, before spinning off into his own series.**

Justin Long is Scott, who must defend his family.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Night Howl

Director Colin Minihan keeps it in the family with gonzo horror-comedy **Coyotes**

WORDS: **MATT MAYTUM**

ON A DARK NIGHT IN THE Hollywood Hills, one influencer gets more than she bargained for when taking her small, Instagram-friendly pooch for a walk in the savage (in all senses of the word) cold open to Colin Minihan's horror-comedy *Coyotes*. It's a statement of intent for how the film is going to sink its teeth into certain LA types with gory relish and over-the-top humour.

The set-up was familiar terrain for the director. "I actually lived under the Hollywood sign, on a street called Beachwood Canyon, for many years," he tells Red Alert. "There's a lot of coyotes out there. I'd be taking a dog out for a walk at midnight and I would get stalked by one, here and there. They get pretty brazen..."

Not that the film – in which one household, inhabited by an ambitious comic-book artist and his family, is besieged by a particularly determined pack of coyotes while a wildfire rages outside – is a particularly serious beast. Its slobbery tongue is firmly in its cheek, with Minihan explaining, "I knew I wasn't going to do the Spielberg *Jaws* thing" when it comes to making people scared of the animals in real life.

The appeal was simply to make "a really silly, fun creature feature... an 'animal attacks' film". With a lean budget and an extremely tight 10-month time period in which to get the movie shot and through post-production before release, Minihan (who also edited the film) says that he took it on "because I love a challenge like that, technically. I kind of saw it as a bit of a suicide mission as well, which I think is appealing to me in a weird way. Like, 'I can pull this off, I think.'"

Things started moving when Justin Long (*Galaxy Quest*, *Barbarian*) came on board to

Mila Harris hiding from one of the killer canines.

Long's comedic background was perfect for the film.

star. It also helped in Minihan's mission to bring the comedic elements of the script to the forefront. "Justin is one of the greatest improvisational actors that lives in the moment and just wants to play in a million directions," he says. "He brings a certain genius to that."

Long's real-life wife Kate Bosworth also plays his wife in the movie, adding to the family-affair vibe on set, which actually ties in with the film's themes. "It was a weird shoot, in a good way, because they're a married couple, and then I've got my wife [Brittany Allen, co-star and composer] in it, so it was a couples' experience making this film. It was fun to have [Kate and Justin] behind the monitor, cheering each other on between takes. It just lifted the energy."

> **"The appeal was to make a really silly, fun creature feature"**

Energy was needed for the fast-paced, often-improvisational shoot, which took place in Bogotá, Colombia, doubling for the Hollywood Hills. The South America shoot wasn't without its obstacles, though. "I learned really quickly that we weren't gonna be able to bring real coyotes to Bogotá," he recalls with a smile. "And we even tried to ship taxidermy to Bogotá and they got confiscated at customs. It made the local news!"

So how did they stage the coyote action, given that the film doesn't scrimp on creature screen time? "The thing that I'm most proud about... I just didn't want to fall back on coyote point-of-view shots, and fall into that trap." As well as having three small puppets to work with ("They're hand puppets!"), Minihan also leaned heavily on visual effects, using the creative leeway of his protagonist's comic artistry to make the coyotes more menacing than they might be in real life.

"We're living in this kind of graphic comic world, so they could almost be more wolf-like at times and just crazier and more wild," he explains. "So we did a full CG route. I think we had three custom fully-rigged coyotes that were designed to look like the puppets."

Also in the mix is practical grue, creatively deployed stock footage and, due to the tight deadline, "we had to rely on some machine learning to be able to take what was a CG shot that just wasn't totally there and then re-texture it and do it that way too, just to get through the line."

Minihan repeatedly enthuses about the sense of fun and play on set, particularly with Justin, who he bonded with in part because they'd both fairly recently become dads. While those experiences fed into some of the film's themes, Minihan was always keen to "knife it with something comedic" if things ever became too sentimental. "We wanted it to be like the antithesis of what a lot of modern horror is, which is bleak and dramatic and serious," he says. "We wanted it to just be a really fun time. I think we live in such a cynical age. It was like, 'Let's throw something positive out into the world for once.'"

Coyotes is available digitally on 29 December and on Blu-ray/DVD on 5 January.

SCI-FACT! Minihan hopes to reboot his 2011 found-footage horror *Grave Encounters* with Long and Bosworth: "I'd love to see Justin go dark."

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Down The Rabbit Hole

Hannibal creator Bryan Fuller revisits childhood fears for **Dust Bunny** WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

MANY FILMMAKERS who were enamoured with – or slightly terrorised by – the films created by Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment are still trying to reproduce that shingle's special alchemy of childlike wonder meets scares. It's not easy to make the next *Gremlins* or *Poltergeist*, but it helped Bryan Fuller nail that Spielbergian tone that the filmmaker had a hand in his feature directing debut, *Dust Bunny*. It's based on an original story that Fuller first developed for the 2020 *Amazing Stories* revival, and the director tells Red Alert that he's thrilled his unproduced script eventually turned into his first film. "What was fun about it is that this is a story that Spielberg was involved in developing, so it has a bit of that direct-from-the-tap Amblin fairy dust that makes all of those movies so identifiable."

Set in a more magical version of contemporary New York City, *Dust Bunny* is the story of old soul in a young body Aurora (Sophie Sloan). Convinced that a bunny-like monster lives under her bed, she's exasperated her parents with her fears and rituals meant to prevent her demise. They ignore her – to *their* detriment – and she's left to try and hire her enigmatic next-door neighbour (Mads Mikkelsen) to kill the beast. He thinks she's crazy too... until he doesn't.

> "It has a bit of that direct-from-the-tap Amblin fairy dust"

A visual feast for the eyes with a script brimming with sly wit and genuine scares, *Dust Bunny* is a modern fairy tale in the mode of *Amélie* meets *Léon* meets Fuller's own *Pushing Daisies*.

Fuller says he was able to get so much visual bang for his buck by bringing on collaborators, both new and old, who understood his vision. "Because it was fairy tale and because we were setting out to make a children's movie, even though we are R-rated, we were very conscious about no foul language, keeping the violence cartoonish and creating a world that we wanted kids to see," he says of the tone.

He credits cinematographer Nicole Hirsch Whitaker (*One Piece*) with shooting in 3:1 aspect ratio, which he loved immediately.

Rebecca Henderson brings out the big guns.

Sheila Atim in a retro-look matching pantsuit.

Sophie Sloan is Aurora, who fears a monster under her bed.

"It performed a duty in creating a psychological space for Aurora by isolating her in the frame with a lot of dead space around her where something could encroach upon her," he explains. "We were always projecting a feeling of unease around her that felt valuable in the narrative."

Fuller also brought in A-listers like production designer Jeremy Reed (*Hard Candy*), his long-time editor Lisa Lassek (*Wonderfalls*) and composer Isabella Summers (*Strange Planet*) to add drama and whimsy. "I love the intimacy of the relationships that you have with department heads and people who are in the boat with you rowing in the same direction," he says. "It's an independent movie, so there's always going to be adversaries and people who do not support you as much

Mikkelsen is Aurora's mysterious neighbour.

as others, and that's what makes the people who do so much more cherished."

That includes his creature team for the menacing bunny. Fuller says that comic book artist Jonathan Wayshak was his first choice to create the monster. "He has this slightly deranged view of characters and characterisations that I found really exciting, just bordering on a sense of madness. Then we took John's sketches over to Legacy Effects, who built a life-sized puppet of the bunny's head and his arms, so it's a mix of puppet and CG. Craig Lyn, our wonderful visual effects supervisor, with [effects house] DNEG, was getting $12 million of visual effects for $1.7 million," he laughs.

David Dastmalchian readies himself for anything.

Fuller says he then had a ball helping Sloan love her first film experience and getting to watch Mikkelsen and Sigourney Weaver add their magic to his words. "After the first time that we shot something, I remember going up to her afterwards and saying, 'Dream come true. I got to direct you in a scene; thank you for that,'" he says of the joy of working with Weaver. "She works with much more experienced directors than I, and has such a history, that it *is* about the work as opposed to the persona with her, and that was really nice to experience. Also, she's just a champion of the people that she works with."

Which is important, because *Dust Bunny* got slapped with an R rating for an assassination scene (no blood involved). That means families may not *see* his family movie. "I want kids to be able to see this, and I want the message of 'believe children' to ring loudly with people after they have seen it," Fuller emphasises. "And to have a conversation about what they believe, what they didn't believe and the things that we are encouraged not to indulge in with our imaginations."

Dust Bunny is in US cinemas now.

SCI-FACT! ***Dust Bunny*** **is the first project to reunite Bryan Fuller and Mads Mikkelsen since their horror series** ***Hannibal*** **ended in 2015.**

SCI-FACT! **The term "action figure" was coined by Hasbro in 1964, when it released its GI Joe toys, which were *definitely not* dolls...**

Monster Mash

Christmas is a time for toys and nostalgia, which basically means you can treat yourself right now to these awesome new Universal Monsters Super7 ReAction+ figures. More than just another classic horror replica, these are the retro-tastic O-ring design, which – if you're of a certain age – makes them gold-standard. **super7.com**

Final Countdown

You're probably cutting it fine if you don't have an advent calendar lined up, but The Disney Store has us *Star Wars* geeks sorted with 12 days of miniature lightsaber hilts. There were also two wonderfully ridiculous offerings for *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, but they're already selling for silly money on eBay. 'Tis the season! **disneystore.co.uk**

Stranger Shaws

Arrow Video's *Shawscope Volume Four* (out 8 December) collects fantastical output from Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers studio. It includes a staggering 16 films from 1973-1983, all newly restored. Highlights include superhero tale *Super Inframan* and bonkers horror *Black Magic* – and how can you resist a title like *Bloody Parrot*? **bit.ly/shawscope4**

NEW AUTHOR

SOLITAIRE TOWNSEND

MEET THE SUSTAINABILITY EXPERT BEHIND ALTERNATE HISTORY *GODSTORM*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Arrow was once Londinium's most famed female gladiator, but she's now a respectable governess. When the young girl she's caring for is abducted, Arrow is forced to unleash her gladiator skills to save the child.

How does this world differ from ours?
→ The Roman Empire never fell – it industrialised. An oil economy powers its wealth, war machines and religion. The Empire's arrogance has metastasised into something terrifyingly familiar for modern readers.

Did the book have any particular spark?
→ Decades ago, while studying for my Classics degree. I never forgot my lecturer saying "the Roman Empire didn't fall, it just ran out of energy". Years later, while working in climate action, his theory itched my brain.

What sort of research did you do?
→ A scientist friend ran the carbon numbers, and unintentionally sparked an entire oil religion! His calculations revealed I needed to burn a *lot* more petrol to reach the extreme climate change in the story. I'd already dubbed oil "Gaea's blood", after the Roman goddess. So I doubled down on that, making my Gaean Priests burn millions of oil barrels in giant sacrifices.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ I'll be 51 when *Godstorm* is published. I didn't even start writing until my forties. So if you're younger than that, don't worry you've missed your chance.

Godstorm is out on 15 January, published by Bedford Square.

NEWSWARP
Breaking Genre News!

Some sequels you shouldn't feed after midnight... Chris Columbus is set to direct a new **Gremlins** movie, written by *Final Destination: Bloodlines* duo Zach Lipovsky and Adam B Stein. Fresh mogwai mayhem is scheduled for 19 November 2027.

The *Hotel Transylvania* franchise gets a spinoff with new animated Netflix show **Motel Transylvania**, arriving 2027.

Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz will exhume **The Mummy** franchise for Universal. Radio Silence is in the frame to direct.

Fox is rebooting classic supernatural sitcom **Bewitched**, showrun by *The Boys*' Judalina Neira. The search is on for sorceress Samantha and hapless hubby Darrin...

Wicked's Ariana Grande joins the cast of **American Horror Story** season 13, along with a returning Jessica Lange, last seen in season eight.

Superman's pal **Jimmy Olsen** is to receive his own spinoff show, with Skyler Gisondo reprising his role from James Gunn's movie.

Netflix is targeting a 2029 release date for the sequel to **KPop Demon Hunters**.

Blue Beetle's Xolo Maridueña will play Portgas D Ace in season three of **One Piece**, with Cole Escola also boarding the series as Bon Clay.

HBO is developing **V For Vendetta** as a TV series, to be written by *The Death Of Bunny Munro*'s Pete Jackson.

Takashi Yamazaki returns to direct **Godzilla Minus Zero**, a sequel to 2023's surprise Toho smash *Godzilla Minus One*.

JJ Abrams's incarnation of **Star Trek** has been officially photon torpedoed by Paramount Skydance, who have abandoned development of a fourth film with the Kelvinverse cast.

Jessica Jones stars Krysten Ritter and Carrie-Anne Moss will reunite on **Claire**, the tale of a terrifying entity that feeds on despair.

Johnny Depp is Scrooge in Ti West's **Ebenezer: A Christmas Carol**, joined by Ian McKellen and *Severance*'s Tramell Tillman.

Michael Shannon, Drew Starkey and Margaret Qualley will star in Southern Gothic horror **King Snake**.

Keanu Reeves will lead **Shiver**, a time-loop tale set on the Caribbean sea. Expect smuggling, sharks and fourth-dimensional shenanigans, with *Deadpool*'s Tim Miller attached to direct.

There's a prequel to **The Conjuring** saga on the way from Warner Bros and New Line. It follows the box-office success of *The Conjuring: Last Rites*.

Deadpool & Wolverine co-writer and *Marvel Zombies* creator Zeb Wells is looking to defrost **Buck Rogers** in a new movie version of the vintage spaceman's adventures.

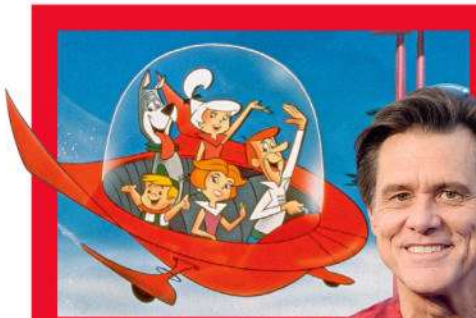
1962 novelty hit **"Monster Mash"** by Bobby "Boris" Pickett is inspiring a family-friendly animated musical from Miramax.

Steven Spielberg has lured longtime collaborator **John Williams** out of retirement to score his UFO-themed movie that's set for next summer.

A sequel to 2009 horror **Jennifer's Body** is being developed by original helmer Karyn Kusama and writer Diablo Cody.

Blumhouse will adapt James Tynion IV and Werther Dell'Edera's comic **Something Is Killing The Children**. Expect a live-action movie and an animated series for mature audiences.

There's a sequel on the way to 2021's Oscar-nominated **The Mitchells vs The Machines**.



Jim Carrey is top pick to lead a big-screen version of futuristic Hanna-Barbera toon **The Jetsons**, directed by Colin Trevorrow.

GREMLINS © WARNER BROS/AMBLIN E/SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS VIA GETTY; HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA © SONY PICTURES ANIMATION; BUCK ROGERS © HERB BALL/NBCU PHOTO BANK/NBCUNIVERSAL VIA GETTY; THE JETSONS © WARNER BROS/GETTY; JIM CARREY: GILBERT FLORES/VARIETY/PENSKE MEDIA VIA GETTY

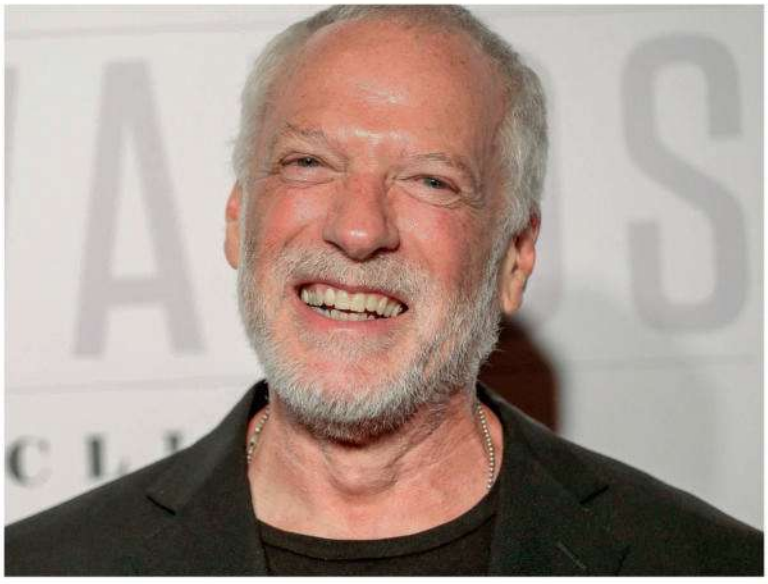
SCI-FACT! **Struzan modelled for the figure on the poster of *The Thing*, putting on a parka, gloves and boots and getting his wife to take photos.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

DREW STRUZAN 1947-2025

Remembering the king of the one-sheet

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



OMAR VEGA/INVISION FOR THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER/AP IMAGES/ALAMY

IN 2009 *SFX* ASKED celebrated illustrator Drew Struzan to share the secret of a great movie poster. "[It] must be art," he told us, simply. "It has to communicate, inspire, entice and motivate our hearts. Be beautiful."

It was a philosophy that powered a prolific career. Born Howard Drew Struzansky in Oregon City, Oregon, he pursued art from an early age, relishing solitary creation while triumphing over a lack of materials by drawing in pencil on toilet paper. After studying at the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, he joined a Los Angeles studio as a staff artist, designing album covers for Alice Cooper, the Beach Boys and Earth, Wind & Fire.

His vivid, airbrushed style soon attracted the attention of the movie industry. "It was a long, hard road until they came looking, but they did," Struzan remembered. After commissions for such schlocky fare as *Empire Of The Ants* and *Squirm*, he collaborated with fellow artist Charles White III on a poster for the 1978 rerelease of *Star Wars*. This memorable one-sheet mimicked the look of a vintage circus poster, peeling from a plywood wall.

Now in the orbit of Lucas and Spielberg, Struzan went on to create the international poster for *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* along with subsequent entries in the *Indiana Jones* franchise. Other iconic campaigns included *Blade Runner*, *Hook*, *Back To The Future* and the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. The striking imagery of *The Thing* – a parka-clad silhouette, its face an eerie explosion of light – was turned around overnight.

Struzan officially retired in 2008 after *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull* but returned to work on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and the *How To Train Your Dragon* trilogy. "I paint truth," he said in 2014. "I paint all the principles that I've learned to live by."

© BBC

NABIL SHABAN 1953-2025

"I relished the idea of driving children back behind the sofa," said Nabil Shaban, unforgettable as gurgling, slug-like uber-capitalist Sil in *Doctor Who*.

Born in Amman, Jordan, Shaban travelled to Britain as a child to receive treatment for osteogenesis imperfecta, commonly known as brittle bone disease. After studying at the University of Surrey, he co-founded the theatre group Graeae, which champions deaf, disabled and neurodivergent performers.

Shaban was cast as Sil in 1985's "Vengeance On Varos", returning in the role for "Mindwarp" the next year. He shared the secret of Sil's memorable laugh: "I'd met a snake the week previous, and got my inspiration from watching it flick its tongue back and forth."

Alongside acclaimed stage performances at the National Theatre, film work included *Children Of Men* (2006). Shaban reprised the Thoros-Betan in two Big Finish productions, as well as 2019 web drama *Sil And The Devil Seeds Of Arodor*.

RALPH SENENSKY 1923-2025

Veteran American TV director Ralph Senensky is credited with six episodes of the original *Star Trek*, including "This Side Of Paradise", which allowed Leonard Nimoy to express Spock's human side.

Senensky returned for season two with "Metamorphosis", "Obsession", "Return To Tomorrow" and "Bread And Circuses", which beamed the *Enterprise* crew to a world akin to the Roman Empire. Along with season three's "Is There In Truth No Beauty?", he directed half of "The Tholian Web" before being dismissed over scheduling problems.

Born in Mason City, Iowa, Senensky served in the Second World War and directed for the stage before entering the TV industry, earning credits on everything from *The Fugitive* to *The Waltons*.

His other genre contributions include episodes of *Night Gallery* and *Planet Of The Apes* as well as *The Twilight Zone*'s "Printer's Devil", featuring Burgess Meredith as Satan.

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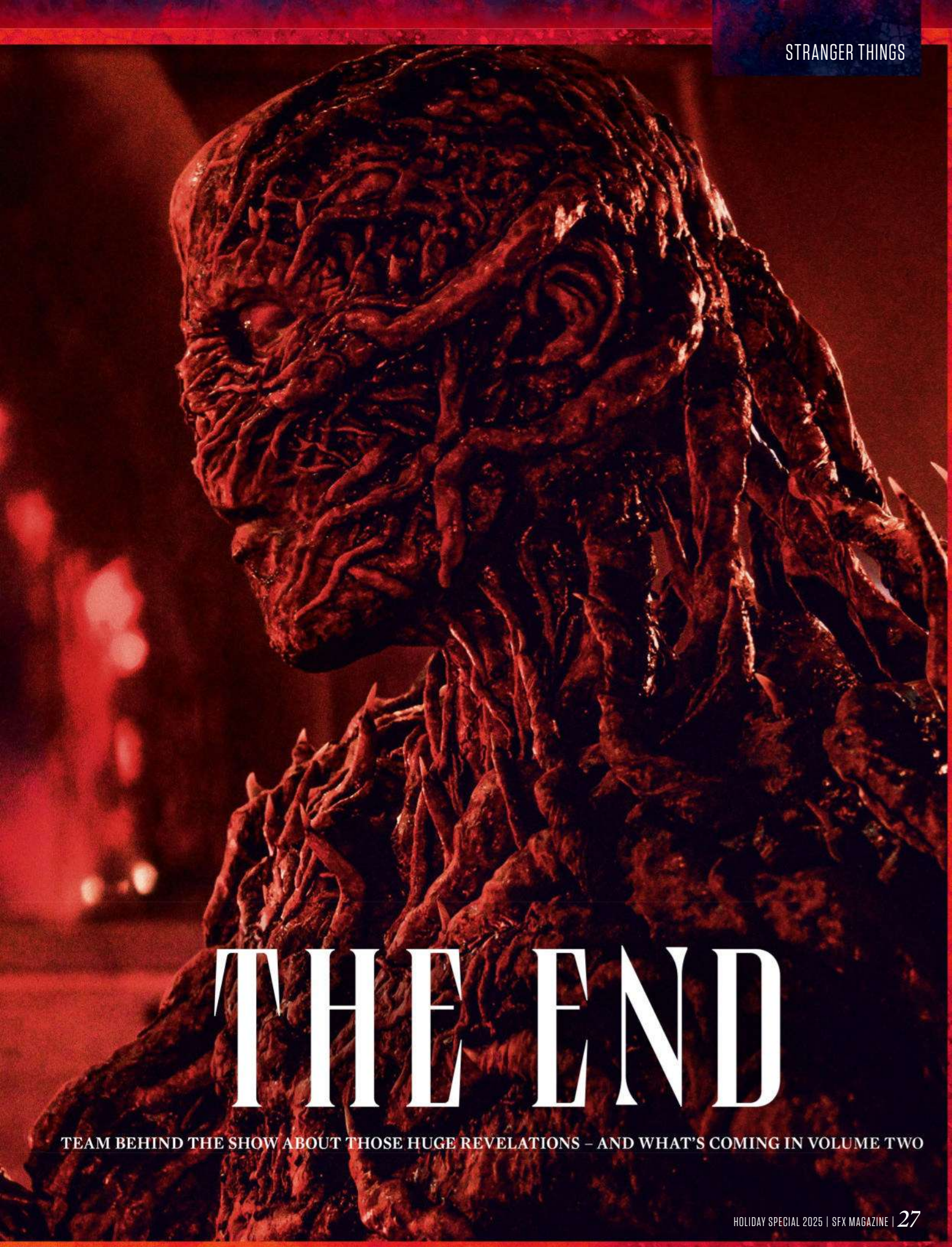
THIS IS STRANGER THINGS

FIVE'S VOLUME ONE ROCKED OUR WORLD. SFX SPEAKS TO THE

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**



THE END

TEAM BEHIND THE SHOW ABOUT THOSE HUGE REVELATIONS – AND WHAT'S COMING IN VOLUME TWO

THE DUFFER BROTHERS SHOULDN'T REALLY BE HERE. They should, they tell *SFX*, be working on the final episodes of *Stranger Things* Five. But instead, they're in Italy, having just stepped off stage at Lucca Comics & Games convention, where they debuted the trailer for the new season.

"Honestly, the last episodes are very close to being finished," says Ross, sitting beside his twin brother, Matt, who's politely trying not to yawn too much as the jet lag kicks in. "All the episodes are locked in, so it's really just down to music, VFX and sound for the final episodes. But we're getting very, very close."

Fortunately the first four episodes of Volume One are complete enough for SFX to watch them in their totality, meaning now, finally, after speaking to the pair for last month's cover feature, we can talk spoilers – and there's a lot to talk about. A quick recap of where we left our heroes: Max is alive, but her consciousness is trapped in a dream-world; Dustin, Steve, Nancy and Jonathan are stuck in the Upside Down; Eleven and Hopper just found Kali, AKA Number Eight; and Vecna has stolen a bunch of Hawkins' kids just before Robin, Joyce, Lucas and Mike could save them. But the biggest moment of all is no doubt the final shot of "Sorcerer", when Will's nose starts to leak blood after unlocking his telekinetic powers and using them to obliterate multiple Demogorgons before they could harm any of his friends.

The Duffers are bringing their story to its conclusion.

"It's something we've been planning to do and have been talking about doing every season, really," Ross says, opening up about the instantly iconic moment for one of the first times. "I mean, if we were going to do it, we knew obviously it needed to happen now, in the final season. So it was satisfying to finally do it."

The challenge for the showrunners, who have been working on the show for over a decade, was to find a way to breadcrumb the inevitable reveal without giving the twist away too soon. "You want it to feel that it's been leading to this for many years, but at the same time, you want it to be surprising and cathartic," Ross says.

"We wanted [the moment] to feel organic to his character and his emotional arc," Matt adds. "So it was very important for us to tie the two things together."

MIND OVER MATTER

That emotional throughline came in part thanks to Robin helping Will come to terms with his turbulent, hidden feelings, and in turn helping him realise his potential for superpowers. And if you felt the hairs on your neck stand up while watching Will using his mind to take control of Vecna's Demogorgons, you were not alone.

"I remember the goosebumps I got when the Duffers pitched it to me," says executive producer Shawn Levy, speaking from a taxi, on his way to the set of his Star Wars spin-off, *Starfighter*. "I remember the goosebumps I got all over again when I read the earliest draft of the script, and I sure as hell still get those goosebumps when I watch it."

"The logic of this iconic, epic reveal of Will's powers just felt so right," he continues. "I'll never forget the first time the brothers pitched me the reveal that Will's connection to the Mind Flayer, to the Upside Down, finally results, not in his being possessed and compromised, but by being empowered, and it's confirmed by that defining nosebleed. It does feel like a holy shit moment, a mic drop of

Dr Kay (Linda Hamilton) is a new face this season.

Actors in onesies stood in for the Demogorgon.

Sadie Sink as Max gets her chance to shine.

Hawkins' radio station is central to the action.

The Byers have dealt with a lot over the years.

Erica (Priah Ferguson) has become a favourite.

a moment, and yet, can I tell you, impossibly and incredibly, the next four episodes take you even further into revelations and storytelling that is jaw-droppingly epic and satisfying."

Before we get into what's to come in the next volume – and we will, don't worry – we have another massive reveal to touch on: Kali was the one being held captive by Dr Kay. Eleven's "sister" last appeared in the controversial seventh episode of season two, widely speculated to have once been a backdoor pilot for a spin-off series about Kali.

"First of all, let me dispel that notion," says Levy. "It was a risky bet to try a standalone episode with largely new characters in the middle of our second season. It worked for some viewers. It didn't work for others, but I respect the hell out of the Duffers for taking

> **"I'm excited that Max is back now. We had to hold her back for so long on Volume One"**

that big swing. But we never forgot about Kali. We never forgot about the plot strands that got established. We have long and persistent memories, and we have a deep loyalty to our audience. We wanted this final season to deal with those strands that weren't yet resolved. And by the end of all eight episodes, you'll agree that we've not only brought them back in and interwoven them, but tied them off in satisfying ways."

"Bringing back Kali was something we had always been talking about for a long time, but we had just never quite figured out how to do it," Matt agrees. "We were working on season five, and we were talking about making sure every storyline was finished. It was always nagging at us that the Kali storyline was hanging. So it was important to revisit it and complete her arc."

Kali's reintroduction to the series will have a major impact on Eleven. "It will be a very different dynamic going into the second volume," Matt explains. "Kali shifts things a lot for Eleven, and I think it'll be surprising for people to see how she ultimately fits into the story. We're excited about that, because it immediately changes the tone. And obviously, the way things ended with Hopper leaves a lot of tension between them."

INTERNAL TRAVELOGUE

Another mystery the Duffers have promised to clarify before the show finishes is the true nature of the Upside Down, Ross calling it the biggest reveal of the final four episodes (which, lest we forget, will be the last ever episodes of the main *Stranger Things* series). He adds that we'll also find out more about the new dimension, Camazotz, named by Holly Wheeler after the alternate dimension in the book *The Wrinkle Of Time*, and which appears to be the creation of Vecna's mind. Intriguingly, Max, currently lying unconscious in the real world, is hiding in an area of Camazotz that Henry is afraid to visit.

"I'm excited that Max is back now," Ross says. "We had to hold her back for so long on Volume One, to keep that a secret. And now with Kali, those two reintroductions really shake things up for the next volume. There's more to unpack there, in terms of Henry's back story, and ultimately, his connection to this evil and what made him the way he is. We get more to that in the next volume."

Continued on page 34...

BACK UP THE HILL

She may be in a coma, but Max is still helping in the fight against Vecna. Sadie Sink discusses her *Stranger Things* comeback

Did you really think Max was just going to lie there all season? Kate Bush's biggest fan may not be awake just yet, but she's helping in the fight against Vecna nonetheless, saving Holly from the creepy Creel household and travelling through Henry's memories, trying to find a way back to Lucas and Hawkins. Sadie Sink sits down with *SFX* to talk about her return to *Stranger Things* – and why hearing "Running Up That Hill" on set again was more than a little strange...

Max is alive! Sort of... she was back in a big way for season five?
☆ I always knew she'd play some role in season five, because the Duffers briefed me on it. But yeah, it was exciting to see what that role was and where she's been for the last two years. I was really happy with everything.

She's awoken in Henry's dreamscape, where she's having to be resourceful, living on edge. How different did it feel playing her this season compared to last?
☆ Oh my God, it was actually really challenging, because it felt like I was on a completely different show. For one, I wasn't with the cast members that I'm used to acting with, but I was with Nell Fisher, who plays Holly. She's amazing. But also, my costume was different, the set was different, the actors were different, so it didn't feel like *Stranger Things*, and that was at first a challenge, but then it also reflected where Max was, too. Everything felt foreign to her. It just matched up perfectly in a way.

Max is trapped in this mysterious, Camazotz place, yet many of the sets you were interacting with were physical ones, rather than green screen.
☆ The sets were incredible. I think pretty much all of what you've seen is man-made, with some mixed with nature, some stuff built as parts of nature, especially with that transition from the green forest into the cave, that New Mexico-looking Grand Canyon-esque set. They would just go to the woods and then build that cave there.

There's also a lot of Max going through Henry's memories, passing from one remembered location to the next, and a lot of that was conjoining sets built next to each other.
☆ It was kind of a trip down memory lane, too, but most of the places were new. Like when she wakes up in the lab, I've never been on that set before, so every scene I was in, I felt very out of place. But, like I said, so did Max.

What headspace do you think Max is in? When she meets Holly, it grounds her because, in a way, she's been solely focused on getting back and helping in the fight against Vecna.
☆ I think finding Holly just gives her this huge new wave of motivation. It's like she says, it's another door. That was the most fun part, to play a version of Max that has been through so much and has just accepted her fate and is just waiting around, and the way she looks is insane – she just looks really feral – but there's this acceptance in it. That was fun to play with and feels very true to Max because she's kind of just like, "Of course this is going to happen to me, but whatever!"

Did the Duffer brothers recommend any watching material this season?
☆ Not particularly for this. We just let it come alive on the day. There's a version of this where she's actually lost her mind, like she's really off her rocker. But we went a different direction, we made her more sound.

It's surprising that she ends up with Holly, and especially that she ends up acting as a mentor to this younger kid.
☆ It's such an odd pairing, but the show is known for that at this point. They love to stick people together; it's such a huge ensemble, so they just mix and match people. Max with a little 12-year-old girl, when I first read that, I was like, "I'm with Holly, the little kid?" But it actually was really amazing to get to act with Nell, who is roughly the same age that we all were when we started *Stranger Things*. It's a very full circle moment, and I think seeing Max take on this mentor type role, especially with her lack of mentors in her own life, and her lack of sibling figures – or a good sibling figure – it's really nice to see her try that on with Holly. The support that she offers and that dynamic, seeing the softer, big sister side of her come out a little bit – because Max is such a good friend, and with all the chaos of season four, you don't really get to see her be that a lot, because there's just so much happening. But you get to see that side of her this season, really putting someone else before her. I really liked to explore that side of her, and it just softened her edges a bit.

Did you find that you were giving advice to Nell as an actor? Because she was the same age as when you started.
☆ She didn't need any advice from me. I definitely tried to help prep her as much as possible for the release of it and stepping into this fandom, because it is overwhelming. I feel like it was just yesterday that I was in that position, and I really leaned on other cast members to tell me what I was in for. It was also nice to give her some support in that way.

It's hard to remember the show without Max, but you only joined in season two. Do you feel there's any difference between you and those guys who were there all along?
☆ Even hearing you say that you forget that Max wasn't a part of it the whole time, that's so good to hear, because it wasn't until after season four came out that I started to feel like I was fully integrated into the show. I think I felt very much like the new kid, which was honestly a great place to be. It's amazing to think that Max has cemented herself in the *Stranger Things* universe. I don't think there are many differences between me and the boys. They obviously have season one that they had together, which I wasn't there for. The biggest difference is that they didn't know the show was going to be a success when they first joined; they didn't know whether or not anyone was going to watch it. When I joined, it was very obvious that it was already a big success.

How do you reflect now on that experience, joining the cast at that point?
☆ I didn't know people would get so protective over these characters in this show. Even after season one, people were so protective, so joining as a new character, you don't want to shake up the dynamic too much. I just really hoped people would like my character, and I thought that everyone didn't like me for a while. Honestly, when season four came out, and people actually cared about Max's plot line, it was a little like, "Oh, wait, really?" It clicked that I'm not the new kid any more.

That season also made Kate Bush's "Running Up The Hill" a hit again. Was it hard to escape the song? It was everywhere!
☆ I'm still able to listen to it. I mean, I don't voluntarily, I'm not listening to it in my free time, but I actually think it's such a hit, and it's a really good song, so I'm not tired of it, but it definitely is one of those songs that, when I listen to it, it's very emotional now,

JEFF SPICER/GETTY

because it's so connected to the show. It always brings up these big feelings.

It's also a part of the new season, with Lucas playing the track, trying to bring back Max.
☆ I remember being like, "Are we really doing this again?" And we were on that set again, and I was in the same outfit that I'd been in since I was 17 years old, and now I was 22, and I was just in the same clothes and in the red void. Obviously, it's different circumstances, different stakes, so it's a little bit different, and it doesn't have the same outcome in the end. But it was this moment of, "Whoa, okay, we're really back here!" Especially after [the song] had become what it did, to go back to that set and do the running again. I was like, "Huh, this feels weird."

With the next part of the season coming, does it feel like Max has more big moments to come?
☆ I think so... I mean, you'll see, I guess!

It's interesting that Max and Lucas haven't had any proper scenes together this season, apart from when she's in a coma.
☆ It's really sad in a way, too. I really missed getting to act with Caleb, because, like, there were none of my familiar faces around me. It was hard at first. But Max and Lucas, it's heartbreaking, they're so connected still in so many ways, him playing the song for her, and her hearing it, and then it going away, and them sensing each other's presence, relying on each other still, but actually not being able to be together.

Some of the cast have spoken about the group chat being lively, with everyone sharing memes of each other. Have you got a favourite Max meme?
☆ I don't know if there's a Max meme! I have memes of other characters, and I'm also big on the stickers. You know how you can make a sticker out of things? I do that for everyone in the cast. I'll just make a sticker and send it to them.

Finally, you're in the next Spider-Man movie, *Brand New Day*. Did you see many similarities between the scope of the production here and the Marvel movie?
☆ It feels familiar in a lot of ways, especially when it comes to not being able to say anything about it...

MR WHO?

Vecna has returned to destroy not just Hawkins, but the world. Jamie Campbell Bower talks Whatsit, One, and Henry

"Here I am, sitting in front of a big picture of my own face," says Jamie Campbell Bower, sitting before a large poster of Vecna's disembodied head floating above Hawkins. Of course, Vecna barely looks like Bower, thanks to the many hours of makeup and prosthetics work that go into transforming him into *Stranger Things*' big bad. This season the actor was given another chance to appear on screen with his real face, playing Henry Creel's other alter-ego, Mr Whatsit.

What do you feel makes Mr Whatsit distinct from playing Henry, One, and Vecna? They're all the same character, yet they're all so different.

☆ First of all, thank you for recognising that Mr Whatsit is separate. Because he is separate. It is a performance, as it were. Mr Whatsit was the idea of what he could be in the current day, if he were still to be around, regardless of costume. It was this presentation of what he would be as a human at this point in time. Then there was this idea of, "How do I make this other person feel safe enough to be my toy, my thing that helps me to win?" I spent time watching Mr Rogers, old things like that, movies like *The Pied Piper Of Hamelin* from the '50s. I spent a long time thinking about that and understanding that this isn't Henry too much. This is a new iteration, a new version. There are Henry-isms, there are things that come through subtly within the first four episodes, and subsequently, as the show develops, there will be more. But this was a whole new iteration of that character.

How do you keep all these different aspects of the character, still feeling like Henry?

☆ There were always things that I took with me to each one, like childhood was something that really made a big impact on me. When I was working on Henry for season four, I spent a long time considering the parental relationship with his primary caregivers. I thought it was really interesting that in Five, of all the things he could have created – because this is not the real world – of all the choices he made, he decided he'd recreate his family home. Why? What needed to be healed within that space? I'd ask myself questions like, if he sleeps, which room does he choose? Does he sleep in his own room, or does he sleep in his parents' bed? Why was home such an important thing to recreate? I came to this idea of safety, this idea that this place never felt like mine, and now I can make it feel like mine, and I can make it feel like home again, if I choose to. Those pervasive thoughts were always with me as I was carrying through on the journey, even with Vecna. When it comes down to it, he has bitter, twisted resentment: "You took everything from me, so I'm going to take everything from you." It is monstrous at the end of the day, with Henry, but I mean, poor boy. Just, poor boy.

The stage play that came out between seasons, *The First Shadow*, delves into Henry's childhood. How much of an impact did that have on you?

☆ It's difficult to say this without sounding like a prick, because I'd spent so much time thinking about his childhood during the filming. We were in lockdown before we started shooting season four, so I had six months to stew on this. I would ask myself questions about the parental relationship, about this relationship with the primary caregivers, so when I went to the stage show, and I saw that moment where [his mother] Virginia hits Henry, I was like, "Of course that happens, and of course the father being an alcoholic creates a distance." This is a child screaming for love, just wanting to be loved, wanting to be nurtured. Unfortunately for the two actors who played my parents, the first and only thing I could say to them when I met them was, "I hate you." So it does inform those thoughts that I've been thinking, the work that I've been doing. To have that be qualified was good for me.

What was it like wearing the Vecna suit this season? You were wearing platforms to make yourself even taller compared to last season.

☆ With season four being so heavily prosthetic, there was a huge amount of power that came with walking onto the set and being the dude, and nobody can think otherwise. Whereas with season five, we're more of a blend between the worlds, between prosthetic and practical and CG.

There were conversations that I had with [prosthetic makeup designer] Barrie Gower about making sure that, when I did walk onto set, there was still that physical size and presence. One of the conversations that we had after our first fitting was like, "Everything looks great, but can we put some American shoulder pads on so I can have that size? If we're shooting this for two years, it would be amazing to do the physical change between being thin and then being hench and massive." He was like, "Be aware of the fact that you're missing certain parts of your body this season, so if you can just hold yourself and hold your gait so we can help out with that in post-production, that would be really cool." He came back when he'd done the shoulder pads, and he'd given me two blocks in the side of my body, so it meant that my arms could sit where they needed to sit, so that I did not have to be too conscious of holding myself in a particular way, I could be more natural in that gait. So it was about making sure that the presence of the character was there for me and for the other actors. I mean, what I was really most interested in was, I still want these actors that I'm stood opposite to be afraid. I need them to be as afraid of Vecna as they were before.

This season starts with a flashback, establishing how Vecna interacted with Will during the first season. What did it tell you about Vecna?

☆ During the press tour for season four, I was really vocal about wanting the relationship between Will and Henry to be explored, because it feels like there's unfinished business there, and I still stand by that. It was a lovely journey to go through that, to have my insanity qualified, to actually be in front of Will again.

The season does really hit the ground running.

☆ On a personal level, this is something I've been carrying with me for four years and thinking about fairly consistently. So it felt like a big sigh of relief that we can begin. That's the truth. We can finally begin. Let's go! I want to get this out of me. It's all been in me for so long. So it definitely hit the ground running.

When we enter that dream space, which we know as Camazotz, we start to see more of Henry's past, like going back to his school.

☆ It's very [*A Nightmare On Elm Street 3:*] *Dream Warriors*-esque, and the fact that we had [the movie's screenwriter] Frank Darabont come in and direct was such a huge blessing. From a personal perspective, I was reading books by [physicist] Michio Kaku on parallel universes, and I was like, "There's just so much information here, I've just got to take it all in." Half of our job as creatives is to really try and understand our directors as much as possible, and Matt and Ross have such huge, broad, varied, different references and understanding of the world that they're creating. So Henry's ability to be everywhere – the term omnipresent came up

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

in my head quite a lot as I was working through this, which is also worrying.

The Duffers have said they wanted Vecna to still seem terrifying, so they used him relatively sparingly. Would you have liked to have been in it more as Vecna?
☆ As this season develops and as our next tranches of episodes come out, you'll see more and experience more. It's such a huge undertaking with all these characters. It definitely felt at times like I had looked at the cake and been like, "I'll have that." This is a ginormous cake. So there was never a time when I was like I would have liked to have done more, because I felt like I had a lot going on already.

Is there anything you can tease about what's coming up for Vecna?
☆ I mean, he is out for blood. He is out for winning...

How is he feeling about Max being in his world? Is there more to that?
☆ More to be discussed. More to be discussed...

And there's Will, who's developed these powers. Has that left him feeling scared at all?
☆ [A moment's silence] Jesus, help me out!

Sorry!
All I can say is that there are certain things that will have been seen in the *Stranger Things* play that are explored further in this season...

What about the scale of the next few episodes? Season four was huge, but episode four this season was massive. Did it feel bigger?
☆ One hundred per cent. Just reading the scripts alone, before even stepping onto set, that set-piece in episode four, it was like, "Oh God, this is gonna be a lot." Just in terms of visual and logistical elements. I've been fortunate enough to see most of the show now in its finality, and it just goes completely crazy. I was like watching it like, "Season four was wild, but this is nuts. This is nuts."

Anything you would like to highlight from your *Stranger Things* journey that we haven't touched on?
☆ Obviously I'm just so grateful to have been such a huge part of this show. It's been a massive part of my life. It's changed my life. I'm so grateful for it. I can't wait to chat once these last few episodes are seen, and finally be able to unclench my buttocks.

Playing with gravity in the warped Upside Down.

Holly (Nell Fisher) gets drawn into Vecna's world.

Holly, a minor character in previous seasons but a central focus of Five, is only in Camazotz because she was fooled by Henry's alter ego, Mr Whatsit. "That idea for Mr Whatsit came while we were working on the end of season four," says Matt. "We thought it would be very cool to have Max trapped in Vecna's mindscape." The brothers looked specifically at Tarsem Singh's critically divisive movie *The Cell*, about a social worker who enters the mind of a comatose serial killer in the hopes of finding where his last victim is hidden. "The idea of moving around a killer's mindscape was something really interesting to us, though at that point, it was just Max, and we hadn't put Holly into the show in a significant way. That idea came as we were working on season five, and that led to it having more of a twisted, fairy tale-like feel."

For Levy, the Duffers' pitch to make Holly central to the season was a surprising one. "When I first realised that Holly and these other kids were going to play a central role in Five, it felt bold and it felt risky, which is why it's bold. But I soon realised that it made organic sense in our show, because childhood and the innocence and power of children has always been at the nucleus of *Stranger Things*. Our former kids have matured into young adults, so centralising Holly and having a true child, it's a big swing, but it feels right."

Levy – who helmed last year's *Deadpool & Wolverine* – directs an upcoming episode titled "Escape From Camazotz", which sounds almost like a spoiler. "If only it were that simple," he laughs when *SFX* brings up the idea of Max and Holly simply stepping back into Hawkins during the episode. "I'll safely tease that my previous episode, 'Dear Billy' [from season four], inspired key chunks of it," he reveals.

The fact that the Duffers have introduced Camazotz at this stage in the series feels like another risky move, especially when you consider how, in a flashback last season, we were given a brief look at another realm, Dimension X, where Henry seemed to give form to the Mind Flayer.

"The characters are moving in these different spaces, but we're all moving towards the same goal, and we understand how each one is connected," Ross says. "We like keeping the show a little bit weird, but at the same time, we like playing within these rules that we've established for ourselves. We have spent a lot of time in characters' minds throughout the show, particularly last season, and that was starting to get bolder as Vecna was pulling people into his mind. That was a pretty big leap. At the time, that was very different from what we had done before. So this was taking that and going one step further with it. And obviously, this is our last chance to really explore the Upside Down, which is why we spend so much time there this year."

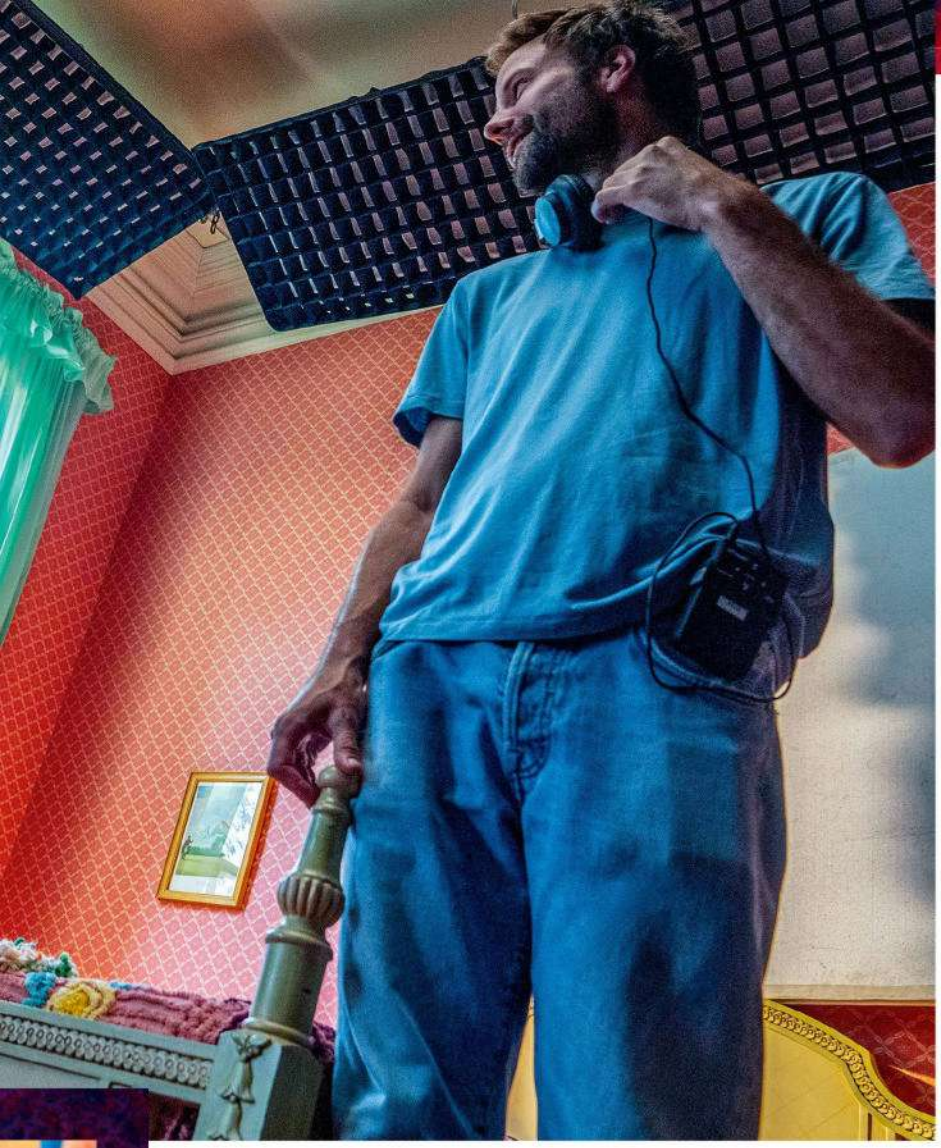
"We've been emboldened by the fact that the audience has gone with us pretty much wherever we've taken them," adds Matt. "So the mythology has gotten more and more complex and more and more layered, but it's never been an issue for the audience. They're connected to the characters in their journey, so they'll follow us anywhere."

Levy confirms that everything will be revealed by the end. "Remember in season two, where they were describing something with the Mind Flayer and someone does a demonstration with a pencil puncturing a piece of paper? The way the show takes huge concepts and explains big ideas in simple, relatable ways – Five does that in a genius fashion. These are huge mythological concepts, but the Duffers have always understood that sometimes we need imagery or props or words that reductively simplify complicated explanations in digestible ways. And season five does that pretty magnificently."

Shawn Levy with Maya Hawke, who plays Robin.

THINGS END

When building season five, these big ideas were what the Duffers constructed around. Some, the brothers say, first took hold before season one was even released, such as having multiple children vanish and multiple monsters doing the dirty work. "When we originally dove into season one, we realised there were too many ideas to hold in that one season, and so we paired it back to a single Demogorgon, and focused on Will and his disappearance," says Ross. "Season two, again, we came up with this grab bag of ideas, including stuff that is



Another of Vecna's identities: Mr Whatsit.

Newcomer Alex Breaux is Lieutenant Robert Akers.

Steve (Joe Keery) with Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo).

Mike (Finn Wolfhard) steps up to lead the gang.

Dr Kay is much more than just a new Papa.

"It's a balancing act... You want to feel like the ending is surprising but inevitable"

now in the finale of this season. Every season, we collect more and more ideas, and then we narrow down what that season is about. When we came to season five, it was like, 'Okay, what are the actual big ideas left that we really want to do?'"

Now, only four episodes of the show remain, and everything, the Duffers promise, will fall into place. "In our minds, we tied up everything that we felt we wanted to," Ross says. "It's a balancing act of trying to tie everything into a tidy bow, but at the same time, you want to feel like the ending is surprising but inevitable, just like with Will's powers, that it just feels right. We made sure we got there with every character."

"From the very beginning, the Duffers were really devoted to sticking the landing, and this has been a North Star mandate for them," says Levy. "That means every episode, every season, must stick the landing and leave people feeling satisfied, and respect the audience and feed them a full, proper meal. So when it came time for the final season, this imperative became that much bigger and more essential and more challenging, because there are so many characters, so many mythological strands, so many narrative strands, and we knew we wanted to leave our audience with a feeling of satisfaction. It's still sad that it's ending, but we wanted the ending to feel satisfying."

The brothers, for their part, have mentioned in previous interviews that they want to avoid concluding the show in a way that shakes the fandom like the controversial *Game Of Thrones* finale did. "One thing I love about the brothers is just the balls of naming the ones that haven't stuck it," laughs Levy. "I probably have extra diplomacy, so I was going to stay title-free, but, yeah, we all know what it's like to create an attachment with long-form storytelling, and when a series sticks the landing, it's deeply gratifying, and that feeling of gratification lasts forever. But so does disappointment. While I won't name the shows that have personally disappointed me in their finale, we really didn't want to stumble."

"There are probably more shows that fell on their face at the end than the other way around, so it's not that hard to find the good ones," the less diplomatic Ross says. "We looked at *Six Feet Under*, a terrific one and a really emotional one. *Friday Night Lights* had two good endings. *Breaking Bad*. I mean, there have been shows

Continued on page 40...

THE APPEARANCE OF...

We finally know episode three's full title, "The Vanishing Of Holly Wheeler". Nell Fisher talks to SFX about taking over the starring role

When *SFX* meets Nell Fisher just before the LA premiere of season five, she has yet to speak to any other outlet about *Stranger Things*. In fact, we're so early to interviewing the 14-year-old, who took over the role of Holly Wheeler from identical twins Anniston and Tinsley Price, that we're able to break some news: her character appears in a new Lego set. "I've been Lego-fied!" she exclaims with understandable excitement – a feeling she had more than a few times throughout her *Stranger Things* journey.

What was your history with *Stranger Things* like before getting the part? Were you allowed to watch the show when you were younger?

☆ When I got the audition, I was bursting at the seams, but I also saw it as my way in to watching it, because my mum had been insisting it was too scary for me. She really meant that it would be too scary for her because she knew she would have to watch it with me. But when I got the audition, I was like, "Okay, come on, there's no way you can't let me watch it now." I started it, and I didn't stop. I went from season one to four in the space of a month. It's such a special TV show.

It must have been amazing joining the series and then quickly learning that there's an entire episode named after your character. Did you know she would be this key to the season?

☆ Not really. I knew that she would be a bigger character this season, and the Duffers had spoken slightly about it, but it wasn't really until I got to the table read, when I was like, "Oh, wow, this is actually a really big character," which was really exciting. I'm really grateful for the Duffers, because it could have gone sideways.

What was that very first table read like?

☆ It was pretty daunting. We were at this long table with microphones in front of us, and it was all black around us, there were camera crews filming. I went in there, and I was like, "Okay, this is fine." I was sat right next to David Harbour and opposite Jamie [Campbell Bower] and next to Sadie [Sink] and I was kind of freaking out.
But then it all started, and it was actually really relaxed, and all the cast were so lovely to me. I just slipped into it.

And before that, what was the audition process like?

☆ I did an audition, and then I did a chemistry read with Sadie Sink in New York, which was so amazing. I spent quite a bit of time with her last year, and she's just such an amazing human. When I met her after we finished the chemistry test, she invited me and my dad out for a really lovely lunch. I do really look up to her, and I see her almost like a mentor.

Max also has that mentor relationship with Holly.

☆ Holly very much comes into this new world, and Max is there, and she's guiding her and coaching her, and they end up forming a really close bond. It's always quite helpful when you end up forming a relationship off-screen that is like what it is on it.

You probably didn't have the same relationship on and off screen with Jamie, though Holly does spend a lot of time with Mr Whatsit.

☆ From the get-go, I never, ever saw Jamie as his menacing character. He's an incredible actor, and he plays it so well that sometimes, in the scenes, I was a bit frightened. But when we went out to Atlanta for a week to do script reads, costume fittings, all of that stuff, I was meeting the cast and halfway through one of my costume fittings, Jamie came and knocked on the door and said that he would really like to meet me and introduce himself, and that he was happy to wait until I was finished. He was done with his day, all ready to go home, and he ended up waiting just to meet me and say hi and how excited he was to work with me. There is obviously a bit of a disjoint between his character and him as this completely gorgeous person.

Most of your scenes are with him and Sadie. Did you have much time to bond with the others?

☆ Even though the scenes with the others are quite short, you do really end up chatting and laughing with them. I really did get to go around with everyone, especially in the later episodes. When we were filming those, and it was stressful, it was tiring, it was tricky, and Millie [Bobby Brown] took me and some of the other kids aside, and we all choreographed this dance to "Please, Please, Please" by Sabrina Carpenter, which was just this gorgeous, welcome break from this really stressful, tricky time of filming. I still remember all the choreography, and I think of it every time the song comes on.

Did you speak to the other actors who had played Holly before?

☆ I did actually get to meet Anniston and Tinsley. We went to a trampoline park in Atlanta, which was really fun. We had two hours there, and we were just bouncing about. They're really lovely girls. But I think Holly is a really interesting character because she's been on the edges of the Upside Down since it started in season one, episode three. Holly sees the Demogorgon coming through the wall. And in season three, she sees the trees moving. She has always noticed things that other people haven't. So I think this season is really interesting, because she's finally getting to see all the answers, and she's really stepping into her own and discovering who she is and what kind of crazy world she has been surrounded by all this time.

How was it developing a relationship with Cara Buono, who plays your mother?

☆ As soon as I met her, I fell in love with her. She's such a warm person. We really did develop that mother-daughter relationship, especially because the Demogorgon attack sequence was in my second week of filming. We were really thrown into it, which make the bonding even quicker.

When you're filming a Demogorgon scene, was that just a tennis ball on a stick?

☆ It was a man in a skin-tight onesie, chasing me around.
That was probably my favourite part of the whole year, filming with Cara and doing stunts. It was so much fun.

Is it tricky not to laugh when there's a man in a onesie chasing you?

☆ I definitely did that a couple of times, but often you just get really into it. I'm there, I've got snot streaming down my face, and I've got goo all over me. So at the start of the day, you're like, "Oh, this is quite funny." And at the end of the day, I'm like, "I'm so over this, just get the take and get me out of this sticky costume."

What was your favourite set to work on? The Creel house and the caves in the Camazotz space both seemed huge.

☆ I loved filming in the Creel house. It's such a gorgeous place. I was there with some other kids, and we all had loads of fun filming there with Jamie. We returned there a lot because it was in a little town. And the caves were fantastic. They were so detailed and massive. Max has been there for what, two years, and so you've got these gorgeous little vintage bits and bobs that she's collected

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

over time. It was really fun just having a poke around.

What can you tease about what's coming next for Holly?
☆ I really love Holly's story arc in this season. She starts almost like the object of the story. Things are happening to her. She's being taken by the Demogorgon. She's being led into the words by Max. And as Volume Two progresses, she really starts to drive her narrative and become the subject and start making things happen. For Holly, this is like a coming-of-age story, but within this crazy sci-fi world.

It must be quite surreal now that everything's coming out, you're now seeing just how massive *Stranger Things* is.
☆ It's insane because it's such a big programme. When my dad and I were in New York, I had never been there before the screen test. So we were doing all the tourist things, and we went up the Empire State Building, and there they have this Wall of Fame, where they've got pictures of a whole load of famous people who have been up there. Next to all these celebrities were the *Stranger Things* cast. It's just got such a big impact.

Have you spoken to the other cast about dealing with the fame that comes with *Stranger Things*?
☆ My mom and I were out for dinner one night with Finn [Wolfhard] and Gaten [Matarazzo], and they were talking about their experiences and what they wish they had known when they were going through this. They were talking about being able to say no nicely, which is quite a hard thing to master. And just then, this woman comes up, and she says to them, "I love *Stranger Things*. Do you mind if I have a photo with you guys?" and Finn just gives this masterclass on how to say no politely. They've given lots of really helpful advice.

What's been the highlight of your *Stranger Things* experience so far?
☆ It's been working with all these amazing people, my fellow co-stars and the directors, like the Duffer brothers, who are just completely incredible. *Stranger Things* is their baby. It was amazing to glimpse inside their world and how they think. It's kind of funny, you would see – I don't want to say twin telepathy, but it almost was. Like, Matt would point at the screen, and before he said anything, Ross would nod, and they just knew what was going on.

SHE'LL BE BACK...

Linda Hamilton has become the latest icon to join the *Stranger Things* universe. She talks to SFX about turning Upside Down

Sure, Linda Hamilton may have once saved the world from a terrifying Arnold Schwarzenegger-shaped robot, but today, speaking to *SFX*, she has been conquered by technology. "Sorry, really sorry for keeping you waiting," she says, joining our call just five minutes late. A dodgy computer clock and daylight savings had managed to scupper her time-keeping, yet the actor – best known to the world for playing *The Terminator*'s Sarah Connor – is here now, and finally able to talk about playing the formidable Dr Kay in *Stranger Things*.

What was your relationship like with *Stranger Things* before joining the show?

☆ I'm a big fan! I enjoyed the show so much. I moved to New Orleans the first year that *Stranger Things* came along, and there's a part of my house that I call The Outside In, because it's this weird alleyway between two buildings. The buildings were joined awkwardly at some point, so it's like the exterior of two different buildings. So I love the show.

That must have made it an easy "yes" when the Duffers called to ask if you wanted the part.

☆ It was a definite yes, and a weird one, because I just immediately was like, "Well, that's a whole other world that I don't belong in." I mean, that's a funny feeling, right? We insert ourselves into many different worlds, but this felt like one that was holy in its own way, and it felt awkward, at first, to see myself in it. Really, it's a nod to just the whole credibility of the show, that I bought into it, and I'm like, "I don't belong in that world."

The Duffers told us that Dr Kay is something of a replacement for Dr Brenner, being a government scientist exploring the Upside Down. Did you see her that way?

☆ I didn't really borrow from past seasons, I just tried to make sure that my character was very distinctly my own character, not just another Dr Brenner. But she has her reasons and her incentives. What do you do when you're creating a character? You ask, "What is the driving force of this character?" And even though it's very much Eleven-centred, it's very different from Papa.

Did you have the freedom to create a backstory for her?

☆ Very little is given to us. Every show is different, and every director is different, but we didn't have a lot of time together, the Duffer brothers and I. We met, and they gave me the basic outline of the character, but we did not really dig deeply into how I was going to play it. There was no rehearsal. So it was really just like, show up on the first day and do everything that you've been getting ready for in the lead-up, and hope it works in the context of the scenes.

We've previously seen you playing mainly heroic characters, particularly Sarah Connor, but here, you're the villain. Dr Kay uses children as bait...

☆ Well, as many people have said, a villain doesn't necessarily know they're a villain. Dr Kay has all of her reasons lined up and has justified to herself why these steps are necessary to capture Eleven and do whatever she's going to do with her. I'm not very subjective about whether she's good or bad. It's very much a character who has things that she wants, and you go and stack that up moment to moment to make it believable. I enjoy playing all kinds of women too, certainly not just the hero. You wouldn't want to just play the one thing.

There's a brilliant scene in the fourth episode where David Harbour's Chief Hopper is being strangled by something in the Upside Down lab. Those sorts of scenes must be great fun to play?

☆ So much fun. We shot a lot of that big work, those fight scenes, the special effects, the vegetation, in the first week of my being there. I mean, we spent a year filming these episodes, but the very first week, they really loaded it with a lot of those important scenes for my character. It was a very interesting start. I looked at it and thought, "Well, they can't be doing all of this in my first week because it's so big, and I haven't even spoken words as the character yet!" But eventually I realised that everything that they shoot is that big. It's big for me, but it's not a big day for them, because everything that they shoot is major in some way.

You've done some really big stuff before, too, but this production seems next level. The other actors have said they were filming for an entire year.

☆ I really have done a lot of big stuff, like *Dante's Peak* was just six months of heat, of largesse, ruining things, blowing things up. I have done work like this, but it is an extraordinary, extraordinary amount of time – a year – to shoot eight episodes. I only live an hour's flight from Atlanta, so I just treated it like a work trip, and then I would come home, rather than planting myself in Atlanta.

And it was an intense year. The schedule would change just because there were just so many, many, many different factors that I couldn't even tell you about, but you just knew that it was really going to have to be fluid. There was this attitude of readiness that I had to maintain and sustain for a year. And that was wacky. That was like me going to, we call it PT [physical trainer], but it's really me going to the gym three times a week just to stay strong, so that when they need me, I'm ready. It was the maintenance and knowing that I had to be 100% ready, because they could call and say, "We need you tomorrow." It wasn't necessarily a schedule that was long planned out so I could understand when I was going in. It was this feeling of having to launch whenever they say. And I thought that was interesting, just that mental toughness of having to be 100% ready for whatever game was next.

Is the idea of working in front of a green screen daunting to you or something to be excited by, because you can use your imagination?

☆ It would be daunting to a new actor, but I started before there was green screen. We did blue screen, then green screen, and now blue is back, but in those days, there was really nothing. Like on *King Kong Lives*, there was just a head and a hand and a foot. It's incredible, the demands on an actor to have to be very specific with where things are coming from. Where is the noise? What am I seeing? A lot of it's added in later. But my entire career has been special effects. It seems like I've done them to death, so I'm well-trained and ready for that kind of work. The intimate scenes, I love. I love getting to have a quiet scene. But that didn't happen in this show. I mean, I love all forms of acting. I don't really have a favourite, just every moment I'm on set. I know that sounds dumb, but you just plug in and do what's asked and make the director happy and then move on.

Is there a certain comfort that comes with playing a character like Dr Kay, who is a gun-wielding

NEIL MOCKFORD/FILMMAGIC/GETTY

badass? Because the Duffers wrote this part for you.
☆ Every day, they were wearing a *Terminator* shirt or some reminder of my past. It was pretty cute, but I guess they felt pretty comfortable coming to me and knowing that I could handle it. Because there's a list of tasks and you've just got to come up with the goods. It was so interesting, because as ready as you are, there's always the unexpected that comes up, like my first day, the scene in the lab with a mask. It's an '80s mask that ties behind the head, and I pull it down, and then I have to pull it back up. And you wouldn't believe how that one little thing – because I'm wearing a wig and I have to preserve the wig and make sure that the mask comes up the same way at the end. But to tie it back on over a wig. I was like, "No, we need to pull it up a little more." I mean, thank God I was ready, because the entire first scene in the lab became about the mask. We burned it at the end of the day. So, as much as you're ready, sometimes it's just stupid little shit like that, but that's acting.

It must also be challenging to join a cast who have bonded over the last four seasons, and to come in and play such a big character.
☆ It was mighty. To step onto that set, that soundstage, one after another, and to try to make myself at home. But the actors were fantastic and welcoming. And I really loved Alex Breaux. He plays one of my soldiers. We were together a lot, we really developed a relationship, and just had so much fun playing. It's very important for me to just have a great time while I'm doing it, and make sure everybody else has a good time. So we did.

We last saw Dr Kay unconscious in the Upside Down. What can you tease about what's next for her?
☆ There are some nice surprises for the audience about who Dr Kay really is and what she's up to. There are some really nice surprises later on. That's all I can say!

Thank you for your time, Linda!
☆ You're welcome, honey. And I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting. Let me see what my computer says right now. [Checks her computer] Okay, my computer has caught up. God only knows what happened there. It's weird when you look at your phone and it says one thing and your computer says another, but I think we're all on the same timeline now.

STAR THINGS

Shawn Levy's going from the Upside Down to a galaxy far, far away with *Star Wars: Starfighter*, currently filming in London

Max and Holly team up, trapped in the Upside Down.

Stranger Things is such a cultural phenomenon, like _Star Wars_ in many ways.
That's the thing. When I was 11, it was *Empire* [*Strikes Back*]. There are these stories that hit just at a key moment in our lives, and they become not just movie memories, not just TV memories, but life memories. And what is more precious than that?

Would it be fair to compare the main _Stranger Things_ series to the Skywalker saga, while the many spin-offs are separate things?
I think that it is, and I will tell you, I'm having this trippy experience making *Starfighter* in the *Star Wars* galaxy while finishing *Stranger Things*. It gives me time and occasion to reflect on the similarities. What you're saying is accurate. But I also think what's astonishing to sit back and realise is that in the same way that *Star Wars* shaped a generation of young audience, conditioning their very sense of what story is and can be, *Stranger Things* is that for a generation. *Stranger Things* and these characters, who are now iconic forever, they will live in the cultural memory of a certain generation, much the way *Star Wars* has in my mind, and that is a remarkable thing and a remarkable privilege to be a part of.

Which other _Star Wars_ project would you say _Starfighter_ is most akin to?
That is a really good question, and I'm not going to answer it. But can I say, thank you. Because I bet you that when I go to this *Stranger Things* premiere with 9,000 other journalists, I'm going to get asked a lot of questions like that, and I better have a fucking answer, because I definitely don't have one right now. So thank you for reminding me. I need to give this some thought. I know my gut answer. I'll just say that the joy of *Starfighter* is creating an original story again, and doing it within this galaxy, but in a timeframe and with characters that are wholly unexplored, and the opportunities for storytelling have been wildly inspiring.

Shawn Levy with Ryan Gosling, star of *Starfighter*.

TOMOHIRO OHSUMI/GETTY FOR DISNEY

Karen Wheeler (Cara Buono) getting a touch-up.

> "There's two hours of storytelling in that final episode that are just truly poignant"

that have had a lot of hype and build-up that have stuck the landing."

"If you're looking for commonalities between those three shows, they're very satisfying endings, but they're not all completely happy endings," adds Matt. "There's a sense of inevitability. Even if what happens to each of the characters is exactly what you hoped would happen, it feels right. It feels correct. So that's what we were going for, more than anything else. Hopefully, we stuck the landing. I'm sure there will be opinions."

So, what can we expect from these final episodes? The Duffers and Levy play coy about specifics – this is, after all, the conclusion to the world's biggest show – but read beneath the lines and there's a lot to learn.

"It's unsurprising to say that Millie Bobby Brown and David Harbour are beasts of acting, and they deliver immensely in the final episodes," says Levy. "I'm also going to give a shout out to Finn Wolfhard and Noah Schnapp, because Mike and Will both play central roles in the final episodes, and those two young actors, who have grown so publicly and dramatically over the decade, they do some of their finest work."

"There are scenes between Dustin and Steve that are all-timers," Levy adds, now on a roll. "There are scenes between Jonathan and Nancy that are all-timers. There's two hours of storytelling in the final episode that are just truly poignant."

OVER AND OUT

After the sheer scale of the first volume's finale, in which Mike and Will had to avoid the Demogorgons ravaging the Hawkins military compound, it's hard to imagine the show somehow going bigger. "Logistically, episode

Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) with Max, and *that* song.

Ready to step into action against Vecna once more.

Holly with her brother Mike in a happier moment.

Jonathan and Nancy have fought Vecna since the start.

Holly with her mum, Karen Wheeler (Cara Buono).

Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and Mike (Finn Wolfhard).

four was probably the most challenging of the season. Just pulling off that whole battle sequence was really tricky, because it involved not just all these stunts and explosions, but all these children," says Matt.

"It was a bit of a nightmare to shoot. So logistically, the scale of the action isn't bigger in the final episode, though I would bet if we looked at how many visual effects shots are in episode eight versus episode four, there's probably quite a bit more. It feels like we've been looking at VFX shots endlessly. It's bigger in terms of character and emotion. That's what makes it feel weightier. Some of our actors give their best performances ever in Volume Two. It's the more emotional volume, for sure."

"A lot of the Will stuff has started to come full circle," adds Ross, "but obviously, he's still got a journey to go on. What is he going to do now that he knows he has these powers? We're really excited to start to bring some of these characters' storylines to a close."

There has been a huge amount of speculation online about who will die this season, and so far, none of the major characters have gone – though Hopper did have a close shave with death. Of course, no one on the *Stranger Things* team will confirm anything (and we wouldn't really want to know, either), but Levy describes watching the finale as an emotional experience.

"I was so deeply, deeply moved by this finale," he says. "I knew the brothers were brilliant. I've worked alongside them as a creative brother for almost a decade, but what they've achieved floored me and moved me profoundly. In fact, I hope the Duffers never reenact the weepy phone call I made to them on FaceTime while I was in London making *Star Wars*. I watched the finale one night and called them at midnight London time, just fucking sobbing and so astonished by how satisfying it is. You're my first interview since watching it. This finale is going to give people a chance to experience true, cinematic storytelling."

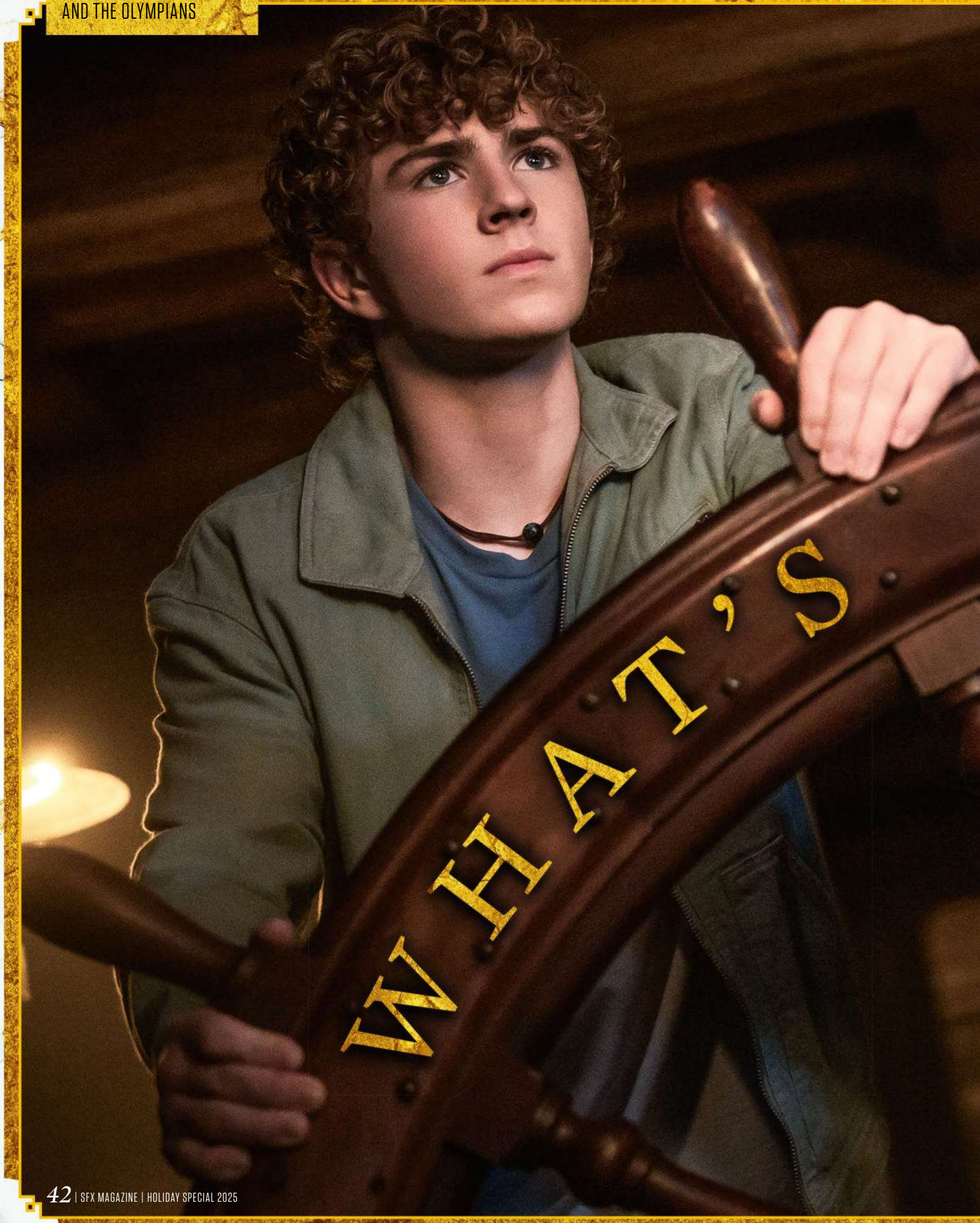
"I'm very excited for people to see the finale," says Matt, "I'm really happy with how it turned out. I mean, we're very happy with the entire second half, but maybe that's just because we've been working on it recently. It's fun that everyone's going to be able to experience it at the same time, because it has its own day, its own release. It's very much like a movie."

And then, the end. A decade of storytelling reaches its conclusion. For the brothers, the ending is bittersweet [see next issue for more on the final days of the show], but there's still more to come: an animated series, *Stranger Things: Tales From '85*, will fill in the gap between seasons two and three, while the brothers have teased a mysterious live-action spin-off is also in the works. However, for Eleven, Mike, Will, Hopper and the rest of Hawkins, this is the final chapter in their story.

"The brothers, even when they were young, far more ignorant storytellers in their early 30s, hatching this show, they always had authentic creative integrity," says Levy. "My job on this show has always been to protect it. While there might be an appetite for more *Stranger Things* in Hawkins, we don't want to outlast the storytelling appetite, and the story rightfully comes to an end here and now. It's sad and it's deeply bittersweet, but the creative integrity with which we make the show, and with which the Duffers lead the show, mandated this ending. So that's the end of that."

Stranger Things Five Volume Two is on Netflix on Christmas Day. The finale – also in select cinemas – follows on New Year's Eve.

STOCK IMAGES: UMER IQBAL, ANNA BUIOKH, JOSE A. BERNAT BACETE, WEAD, NATALYA BOSYAK/GETTY


WHAT'S

KRAKEN?

PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS RETURNS FOR A SECOND SEASON – AND THIS TIME, JUSTICE IS BEING DONE TO THE SEA OF MONSTERS

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

SFX HAS ONLY JUST SET FOOT ON Canadian soil, yet already Disney is chauffeuring us away to an idyllic beauty salon, where everyone wears white robes and guinea pigs roam freely. It may sound like a wonderful, all-expenses-paid holiday, yet the reality is somewhat less glamorous: we're really standing on a set, built inside a studio just outside Vancouver, and the temperature this January morning has just hit six degrees. Before us, the cast of *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* – a modern-day spin on the Greek myths – are filming a scene for the show's second season.

Walker Scobell and Leah Sava Jeffries, who play Percy and his friend Annabeth, are speaking in hushed tones, having just realised that their host, the Goddess of Magic, Circe, may not have benevolent intentions towards them. They start to move quickly, until a director calls cut. The pair shuffle off stage for a break, meaning *SFX* can snoop around. The set's an intricate build: faux-marble sculptures are all around; Circe has a wonderfully large office with an overlarge, wooden desk; corridors lead to even more rooms, some fully constructed.

"I can't believe that we're on the second season," Rick Riordan, who wrote the books and co-created the show, says once we're sitting in a black tent, watching the action through a monitor. "It took us a long time to get here, so it's wonderful to see it all come to fruition. It's really wild to think that we're almost done with filming the second season. I don't know how that happened. The time seemed to fly."

Walker Scobell as Percy, using the power of music.

WACKY RACES

This is the second time Riordan's books have been adapted to the screen, the first being a duo of movies (based on *The Lightning Thief* and the second book, *The Sea Of Monsters*), neither of which were particularly beloved by audiences. The streaming show has been much better received. This follow-up season retells the story from the second book, which sees Percy adventuring through the Bermuda Triangle in an effort to find his missing friend Grover and recover the mythical Golden Fleece. This time, for Riordan, the idea is to do the original story justice.

"Someone asked, 'Does this feel like a birth or an exorcism?'" Riordan says with a chuckle. "It's a little bit of both."

We walk to another set, a recreation of the Princess Andromeda, a cruise ship captained by the traitorous Luke Castellan (Charlie Bushnell), who hopes to revive Kronos, the Titan of Time, Evil, and Harvest. One room holds Kronos's huge sarcophagus – no points for guessing he's the series' Big Bad – and although we're meant to be at sea, there's no actual water in sight. However, that hasn't been true of every set.

"When we did another ship going into a whirlpool created by the Charybdis, we wanted to tilt the set so that we could give the sense of the ship sliding in," supervising art director Raymond Garrioch says. "It was built on a big, long hinge that ran the length of the ship."

"Then we hit it with giant waves and water cannons," adds set decorator Hamish Purdy.

The pair explain that, on the first season, they extensively used the volume – a soundstage surrounded by LED screens, made famous by *The Mandalorian* – partly for practical reasons, but also because they felt beholden to use the new technology. For the second season, they decided to take a more practical approach, prioritising physical builds.

"We have gone much bigger this season, we have massive sets," Scobell says. "In season one, we filmed mainly on the volume stage, which was amazing, but that just wasn't going to work for season two because of the huge sets we needed to make, so we ended up filming a lot on location – which I love!"

One set that could not be housed within this studio lot was an arena for the chariot races at Camp Half-Blood, in which teams compete in a dangerous, Ben Hur-like competition. The entire arena was made real, and the show's cast were riding horses around at speed.

"It was the first thing, at the beginning of the writing process, that we all had a moment to decide, 'Can we do this? Can we do it safely? Can we do it well?'" says showrunner Jonathan E Steinberg. "When you think about this book, the race just pops into your memory, so we felt like, 'All right, let's figure out a way to do this without hurting anyone.' It was a big deal, and something I'm really proud of. It's one of the biggest things I've ever been a part of shooting, having however many horses and children doing full-speed hairpin turns. It was an ordeal, but it looks pretty good, and nobody got hurt."

For Riordan, the chariot race was another moment of redemption for his story, the

The physical sets are larger for the second season.

We get to see more of the Big House this season.

Treasures abound in Polyphemus's dingy cave.

Circe's spa is more dangerous than it looks.

Jason Mantzoukas as Mr D; Timothy Simons as Tantalus.

Leah Sava Jeffries's Annabeth in action.

"It's nice to have the chance to keep the story the same, but also refresh it"

competition having been omitted from the maligned movie adaptation. But more than that, the new show has offered the author a way of updating Percy's tale for the modern day. "It's a beautiful chance to do over," he says. "It's now been 20 years since the first book came out, which is mind-boggling in itself, and a lot has changed in 20 years. It's nice to have the chance to keep the story the same, but also refresh it and make sure that it feels relevant and timely. I mean, I do think that these stories, the Greek myths, have been with us for centuries because they're timeless. So there is that element that doesn't change."

REWRITING HISTORY

Because the story is now being told on TV, it requires a form of translation – "Like translating from one language to another, you have to make changes," Riordan says –

Several ships feature in this water-heavy season.

A full quarter-mile track and grandstand were built.

The Princess Andromeda is a luxurious cruise liner.

All the children of Poseidon share a cabin.

“We want to make sure that every time you watch, you get deeper and it gets more fun”

with Steinberg explaining that they approached the series by centring how the books made readers feel.

“The easiest way to make sure this show doesn’t work was to try to just make the book,” he says. “Part of our approach was asking, ‘What were the things that really stand out from the book when you think about it years later?’ We then try to figure out how to recreate that experience, which might not be the same as the book in some places. That approach was something Rick really embraced, the fidelity to the story, to its details. It’s an adaptation, it’s a different medium, and it wants different things.”

Steinberg was particularly keen to bring elements of future books into the earlier seasons, something Riordan had, naturally, been unable to do while writing them. “Rick wrote these books sequentially, and had he had the time to rewrite all of them, knowing where the story was going, I’m sure he would have taken the opportunity,” he says. “This is an opportunity to introduce book two to book five, to be able to bring some things forward and to give the feeling of their presence in the world of season two without spoiling anything.”

SFX walks around the studio a little more; in one room, just off the soundstage, prop master Michelle Hendriksen shows us the Golden Fleece. It looks like a giant bristly golden scrubbie – fine, golden metal strings bunched together like “steel wool”. It’s not the most attractive object, but on camera, like a magic trick, it transforms. “This is probably the one prop we don’t love,” Hendriksen says. “It is very heavy and very, very unfriendly, but on camera it’s fantastic.”

In another room, we see the costumes for the alluring sea sirens. Don’t worry, they’re not going to be in golden bikinis, but full-body, demonic-looking suits, covered in shells, as if these women have been lashed by waves for a millennium. Then, back on the soundstage, we head to the bottom half of a cave belonging to the one-eyed giant Polyphemus, where there are treasures aplenty. The production team played with the scale of props, making some small so the actor playing Polyphemus would seem big, and making some huge, so the other actors would look small.

It’s all fantastical, much more so than the first season, which saw our heroes travelling through the real world and discovering corners of what was hidden underneath. “Season one was trying to create the feeling of being on a cross-country American road trip with monsters,” Steinberg says. “This season, everything is monsters and fantasy and the magical world. The minute you crack open the book, you feel like you’re moving deeper into this universe that you really want to inhabit. Some of it is also just us wanting to raise the bar. Season one, we hope, was a ride, an experience, and a world people wanted to live in. We want to make sure that every time you watch, you get a little deeper and it gets more fun.”

A few months after our visit to Vancouver, *SFX* catches up with Steinberg. Since visiting the set, a third season has been commissioned, before the second has even arrived. “We started shooting [season three] in August,” he says. “Everything’s humming along, everybody’s excited and doing good.”

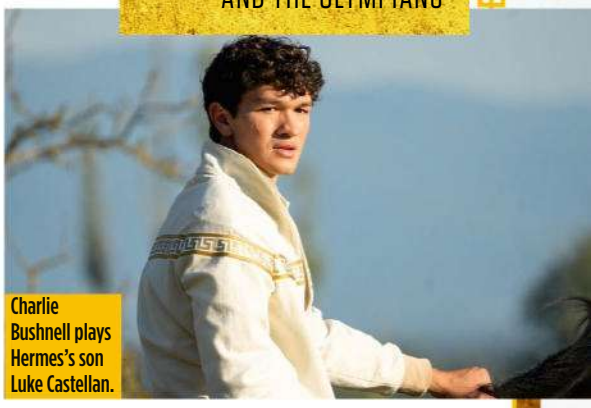
CREATING A CYCLOPS

One-eyed giants have been done on screen before – but they’ve never looked this good

For the showrunners, one of the biggest challenges of adapting *The Sea Of Monsters* was bringing Percy’s half-brother Tyson, the one-eyed son of Poseidon, to life.

“Going into the laundry list of all the things that could go wrong, and things we are going to figure out, the chariots were the most physically dangerous, but Tyson felt like the most unachievable to me,” says Steinberg. “The idea that we were going to produce a character who needed to be somebody you fell in love with instantly, whose humanity you attach to instantly, and you understood not just his connection with Percy, but all of the nuances and complications, and we were going to do that

The chariot race didn't feature in the movie version.



Charlie Bushnell plays Hermes's son Luke Castellan.

It's somewhat unusual for filming to start on a new season of a series before the old one's even been broadcast, but time is of the essence for this particular story: Walker Scobell, now 16 years old, is not getting any younger. "That's something I didn't even consider," Riordan said back in Vancouver.

Now, the team very aware of the fact that the human actors are ageing and growing, and that's not a timeline they can suspend. "We are doing our very best to have them not have their own kids by the time we get to season five," Steinberg says. "The gap between season one and season two, it's hard. There's a leap of faith that goes into making a show like this, to have an ongoing, overlapping production model that's expensive and requires a lot of commitment. What changed [with the gap between seasons two and three] is that people watched it and seemed to like it. The faith that everybody had at Disney was something we were really appreciative of, and for them to then feel validated and to feel like, 'Oh, this thing that we love and we really believe in, it seems like people are coming to it', that is the secret sauce that hopefully gets the machine running and keeps it running for a long time."

We bring up the fact that we recently spoke to the creators of *Stranger Things* and discussed how their kids are no longer kids but adults, in some cases with children of their own. "Just to be clear, we're not taking our time either," Steinberg says with a laugh. "We're going to try to get through this thing."

Percy Jackson And The Olympians is on Disney+ from 10 December.

through one eye? I've never seen that done before.

"I've seen Cyclopses on screen, but they tend to be pretty noticeable for the application, how they made it work, and the last thing I feel when I see them is a connection to their humanity. It felt really scary, because I just didn't know how we were going to do it."

The key was working with Industrial Light & Magic, the visual effects wizards at Disney, who figured out a way to capture the humanity of the actor, Daniel Diemer, while expressing his normal, two-eyed vision through just one. "A lot of it was them just doing amazingly brilliant work, but a lot of it was also Daniel," Steinberg continues. "Without the life he was able to bring to it, it wouldn't have mattered what kind of solution we came up with technically. When we watch the cuts now, I start forgetting that Daniel has two eyes. You just connect to this character who's so organic, and he's just there, and it doesn't seem like a struggle at all. It seems really effortless, and there was a lot of effort that went into the effortlessness of that performance."

Daniel Diemer plays Percy's cyclops half-brother.

Diemer, who previously appeared in Mike Flanagan's *The Midnight Club*, says he had to give ILM as much footage to work with as possible. "I don't have tracker dots on me, it's all computer-generated with the systems that they're creating, so it's taking my performance and being able to just integrate that into one eye so they're retaining as much of my performance as possible. After a scene's done, we do it again, just to get as much of my face as possible, and I give them as many different angles of my eyes as possible." There's no priority given to either of his eyes. "It's a nice combination of the two," he says. "Though I'd love for it to be my left."

Despite joining the show for the second season, Diemer says he gelled immediately with the rest of the cast to the point where they all feel like family. He's also working with fire and underwater specialists for various scenes. "Those have been some of the best moments of my entire life and definitely career," he says. "I'm so stoked on it. I've been able to have some fun with weapons training, which is just a dream come true. The whole thing has been fantastic."

All this with one eye – and a huge role to play. "Tyson has the biggest heart out of any character I've ever played," Diemer says. "He's just so loving, and he wants to give so much. For so long, he's lived without anybody giving that back to him, he's so desperate for that. It's such an interesting space to start from, being like an empty tank trying to do his best, and then to get brought into a world that's so dangerous, where he hasn't been on the adventures that all these guys have been on together. He's very much coming from an outside perspective and trying to be as much of a part of it as he can be. Audiences are going to really love his heart and how he sees the world."

STOCK ART: CHUCHAWAN CHAIRIMWIANG, JES2UFOTO/GETTY

ONE, TWO, FREDDY FAZBEAR'S COMING BACK FOR YOU... GET READY FOR

FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S 2

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

FRIGHT NIGHTZ

LET'S
PARTY!

Mckenna Grace is paranormal investigator Lisa.

BASED ON THE SMASH-hit videogame series in which players try to survive five nights in a rundown pizzeria stalked by animatronic mascots, *Five Nights At Freddy's* became both the top-grossing horror film of 2023 and Blumhouse's biggest box office success to date.

"It exceeded all of our expectations," director Emma Tammi tells *SFX*. "You never know whether or not a pre-existing fanbase will embrace a new adaptation of their beloved treasure, so the fact that this landed with them and felt authentic to the world was fantastic. It was certainly what we were hoping for."

Tammi says there had always been hopes of continuing the story, and after the film's success, she didn't hesitate to return for a second helping. "The idea of being able to all get back together and build off what we started, in a way that felt like what the fanbase was hoping for and what we were collectively excited about – expanding the world, expanding the characters and certainly expanding the animatronics – was just a really, really exciting opportunity."

FAZBEAR'S FOLLOW-UP

Set a year and a half after the events of the first film, *Five Nights At Freddy's 2* follows former night watchman Mike (Josh Hutcherson) and police officer Vanessa (Elizabeth Lail) as they try to rebuild something resembling normal lives. "They talk about getting back to a place that feels like a normal rhythm of life and socialisation and whatnot," Tammi explains. "Of course, all the baggage from movie one is still with them. Whether or not they're admitting that, it comes creeping back!"

That baggage includes Mike's younger sister, Abby, who has been kept in the dark about the fates of her animatronic friends – Freddy, Bonnie, Chica and Foxy. When she slips away to reunite with them, it unleashes a fresh wave of "challenges, adventures and surprises", this time also playing out at a second long-abandoned pizzeria. "So it's only just begun for Mike, Abby and Vanessa, unfortunately," Tammi teases. "The animatronics are only increasing in number and fierce intentions."

New arrivals include the Toys – shinier, more cartoon-like versions of Freddy and co originally designed as child-friendly upgrades but armed with advanced tech that makes them even more dangerous than the originals. Crawling out of storage are the Withereds – "some of my favourite designs," Tammi enthuses – battered relics of the first line-up, discarded when the Toys took over. Then there's Mangle, Foxy's would-be replacement, reduced to a crawling tangle of wires and limbs after being ripped apart by young diners.

"To have these creatures expanding so much and figuring out new ways in which they move and speak in some cases – which wasn't the case in the first movie – brought a whole new dimension," Tammi says. "It was just really, really exciting to layer into what we were already building off."

While the first film was loosely connected to the original 2014 *Five Nights At Freddy's* videogame, the sequel is rooted firmly in the second – and Tammi reveals that it's full of Easter eggs. "Our whole production design team, set dec and every department head completely absorbed themselves in the *Five Nights At Freddy's* world – specifically in relation to game two – to pack in as many details as possible so that it felt like a relation – something the fanbase would recognise and get excited about."

Tammi admits that she felt the weight of responsibility to do right by the series' countless devoted followers. "At the same time, at some point you need to put that aside, trust in the team that you're working with and just try to make the best movie possible. The goal is to take that enthusiasm and channel it in a way, but not let the pressure become stifling." Her approach to the film, she explains, was about "walking the line between how we expand and still feel true to the DNA of what we started, what we created and what the audience has embraced."

> **"You never know whether or not a fanbase will embrace a new adaptation"**

As with the first film, series creator and screenwriter Scott Cawthon was heavily involved throughout production. "He wanted to ensure that there aren't any missteps," Tammi says, "which I was very appreciative of because he's so much more tapped into the conversations happening online. Not just about the movies, but the franchise in general, which includes huge aspects of novelisation feedback and, of course, game feedback. There are many aspects of this franchise, so it's really crucial to have him in the mix."

So has Cawthon ever shared *Five Nights* secrets that haven't made it into the games or books? "Yes, we have conversations," Tammi smiles. "Many will be like, 'In the novel this happens, but in the game, *this* happens, and then the fan theory is something totally different.' It'll be more like him giving me a breakdown of what all the kinds of perspectives are.

"One thing that he said to me early on that was really interesting was that he doesn't want

STOCK ART: SHELLY STILL/GETTY

Withered Chica is even more terrifying than the original.

The Spring Bonnie suit hides a dark secret inside.

to put a lot of answers out into the world," she continues. "What really makes this fanbase dynamic, thriving and creates the longevity for this conversation is that everyone can chime in with a theory. It can be a little messy, but that's what makes it worth talking about still, and that's what makes it engaging. Keeping the mystery alive is one of the franchise's strengths."

FAN CASTING

The sequel also introduces a "fun little gang" of supernatural investigators filming a public-access show called Spectral Scoopers. "There's an Easter egg in the name for the fans," Tammi reveals. Among them is Mckenna Grace (*Annabelle Comes Home*), who steps into one of Freddy's pizzerias "ready to make a great episode of creepy, wonderful, ghostly things", only to find herself in way over her head.

Grace's casting came with an extra thrill for the actor: she grew up a huge *Five Nights At Freddy's* fan. "She sent Scott and me the sweetest video message through the casting department at Blumhouse, who she was working with on another film," Tammi recalls. "She said, 'Please consider me for a role because I'm the biggest fan of this franchise.' It was an honour to have her be part of it, not just as an actor, but as a fan. Watching her walk through the sets – taking it all in and totally in awe – was one of the most incredible things."

Mike (Josh Hutcherson) is back behind the desk.

Josh Hutcherson once again throws himself into the insanity of the *Five Nights* world. "I mean, you have to," Tammi laughs. "I think resisting the insanity of the show would be an impossible journey. But what's so incredible about Josh is that he throws himself into the insanity while still being honest and authentic as the character.

"Mike is very grounded, and to remain grounded and truthful in the middle of all of this is an extreme talent, and we all know, of course, that Josh is extremely talented. He can do anything, but the fact that he's chosen to be a part of this and continues to be just the best partner on this journey is huge. His and Abby's journey and relationship really is the heart of the film."

Tammi has watched Piper Rubio (Abby) grow up across the two shoots. "To really tap into the instincts of a nine-year-old, but also make them feel like they have a voice, is a journey," she says. "On our last take of the first film, she suddenly shouted, 'Can I get one more? I have an idea.' That was one of my proudest moments as a director, because she was so young and already thinking like that. And, of course, she's physically growing too. In every way, she's maturing into a more and more wonderful version of herself."

Tammi adds that Rubio has become a huge fan of the *Five Nights* lore and the franchise between making the films. "Now she's like a complete *Five Nights At Freddy's* expert and can talk your ear off for hours about any subject," she laughs.

PIECED TOGETHER

The sequel also brought new – and bigger – creative challenges. While much of the first film was confined to a single pizzeria, this one juggles multiple locations and very different story threads. "That's its strength, and that's what's exciting about it, but was a challenge," Tammi admits.

"We knew we had all the pieces. The pieces coming off set were incredible. But then figuring out how they all come together in a cohesive and exciting, streamlined way – and wrangling it all into being the best film that it could be in post – was probably the biggest push. But in a way, it also came together relatively quickly."

Asked which scene she enjoyed filming the most, Tammi points to one set in a cramped music box room hidden beneath the pizzeria stage. "It was physically challenging to shoot in – manoeuvring crew, actors and camera around was tough – but when you walked into that room and then saw it on film, it was just breathtaking. Completely transportive," Tammi says. "It felt like such a standout set-piece and so connected to one of the main antagonists of the film, which also just made it even more heightened and exciting."

Tammi is eager for audiences to see the action sequences with the animatronics – who, as the trailer shows, burst out of the pizzerias and into the real world for the first time – but what excites her most are the reactions she can't predict. "They're always surprising, and I can't wait," she says. "The pace of it and the energy of the film is such a fun ride. I'm really hopeful that this will satisfy a lot of what the fanbase was looking for in a sequel. There's so much new to take in." And for those unfamiliar with the franchise? "They'll still get the gist and have a lot of fun and be scared along the way," reassures Tammi.

Looking ahead, she's cautious about making promises but hints that a third film could happen if the success continues. "I was so lucky with how this one came together, and we leave it in a really exciting place. As an audience member, it makes me want to know where the journey goes next, and hopefully we'll get the chance to explore that."

Five Nights At Freddy's 2 is in cinemas from 5 December.

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VIVA NEW VEGAS!

THE GHOUL IS BACK... AND THIS TIME AROUND, HE'S SET TO BATTLE THE DEATHCLAW! STEP ONTO THE FALLOUT SET WITH SFX FOR A BEHIND-THE-SCENES PEEK AT SEASON TWO IN ALL ITS POST-APOCALYPTIC GLORY

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

SFX IS SITTING IN Jonathan Nolan's director chair on the set of *Fallout*. It's a dull, drizzly day in Los Angeles, but there are much brighter skies displayed on the huge LED volume screen inside Stage 15 of Culver City Studios. The top-secret scene being shot today involves a conversation between Maximus (Aaron Moten) and Elder Quintus (Michael Cristofer) as they wander across a walkway on a Brotherhood of Steel airship called The Caswennan. The huge Zeppelin is hovering in the empty skies above the Wasteland, a scene that will appear in an early episode of the eight-part second season.

"The story of season two picks up directly after the season one finale," explains Moten, taking a break from filming. "Maximus is newly promoted and he's dealing with what it means to be a leader among his faction of the Brotherhood of Steel. He's been given the 'golden boy' treatment for having been the slayer of Moldaver. It's a new-found position for him and it brings with it a lot of questions, such as, 'How do I lead? What kind of leader am I?'"

Moten is thoughtful and engaging with his answers: "I think it's a good start to his journey of making his own decisions about the world that he lives in, as opposed to where we find him in season one. In season one, he still had a sense of discovery. He was thinking about things like, 'What do I actually want? What is important to me?' This is more about, 'How do I start to carve my path?'"

BIRD ON A WIRE

Behind the scenes, a bustling crew beavers away with preparations for the next take. An actor clomps around in T-60 power armour, alongside a helper holding his helmet and another crew member with a wooden stool. Apparently it's not very easy to rest when you're wearing an oversized suit. Outside the humongous doors of Stage 15, a small gathering of costumed characters stand around chatting in their Brotherhood of Steel wardrobe. One's chomping on an apple. Another sips a coffee. It's all very nonchalant.

Inside the darkened sound stage, one of the iconic Vertibird craft glints in the corner of the room. It's open and available for exploration. While other vehicular props might be made of wood and painted to look like steel, this is not. It's metal. It's solid, spacious and very cool. "I feel really comfortable in the Vertibird," comments Moten. "This season, there's a new gimbal that operates it. That gimbal is going to →

> **"Look at where the camera's not asking you to look. There's so much going on"**

IMAGES: LORENZO SISTI/AMAZON STUDIOS

Annabel O'Hagan is Vault 32's Overseer.

win an Academy Award. It can be tilted, changed and shaken. It's really impressive."

SFX asks if the constant rocking motion during Vertibird scenes give the actors a feeling of travel sickness. "After a full day on a Vertibird, I don't feel it until I'm home with my eyes closed in the shower," Moten chuckles. "That's when you realise your whole equilibrium is a little off. It's dizzying then – but during the flight itself, it just feels like you're on that ride. You feel the motion sickness later. It definitely hits you."

BEEN THERE, DUNE THAT

An undulating expanse of sand dunes is displayed on the lower portion of the mammoth LED volume screen, while the upper portion seamlessly blends part of a practical airship set with footage of characters in other areas of the airborne vehicle. The backdrop is a dazzling blue sky, and it's all pretty spectacular to see in person. It's also something that's not lost on *Fallout* producer James Altman.

"I love our volume sets because they allow us to do things that are really beautiful and interesting," he tells *SFX*. "To be able to see the flight deck of one of these Brotherhood of Steel dirigibles is incredible. The way that the volume stage blends so seamlessly, you get really amazing light splash on our performers – and it looks and feels very real in a way that would be difficult to replicate any other way."

He's referring to the reflection of the action from the LED volume screen, which gives off a different look when compared to green screen filming. "If this was a green screen set, you'd have so much green spill on everything," explains AJ Sciutto, the director of virtual production for design and tech company Magnopus. "Everything that reflects or is reflective would have a green reflection, as opposed to an actual reflection from the screen. The amount of clean-up required for visual effects would be astronomical, especially when you have these suits of power armour that are super reflective."

The actors being able to see the real-world action unfold live on a huge screen instead of using their imagination on a green screen stage is another advantage of the volume. "As an actor, the volume is really helpful," adds Moten. "Mostly because you can invest your imaginative work into what's maybe more important for a scene, which is who you're talking to and what's going on, as opposed to thinking about, 'Oh, how tall would that propeller be?' The visuals are all there for size and scale. What we're doing with the Caswennan is really impressive."

Maximus (Aaron Moten) makes his return.

Johnny Pemberton and Aaron Moten chill.

Hank (Kyle MacLachlan) is being hunted by Lucy.

> **"The story of season two picks up directly after the season one finale"**

There's often a little hiccup or two when you're working with state-of-the-art technology. During our time on set, a flapping flag on the Caswennan stops and starts to flicker, which means the tech has to be rebooted. This gives *SFX* the opportunity to step on to the airship step and gawp. It's →

It's becoming harder for Lucy to live by her rules.

ELLA ENCHANTED

Ella Purnell (Lucy MacLean) on gamers, goodness and The Ghoul

What's going through Lucy's mind at the start of season two?
Going into season two, I had a lot of questions about what Lucy learned at the end of season one – about her father, the vaults and where she comes from. What does that do to a person? That was my biggest question. Who is she going to be now? How is she going to be now? Is she broken? Is she irreversibly damaged? Does she go on a killing spree? Does she become the bad guy, or does she double down and use this as fuel and motivation to lead a revolution and promote world peace in the Wasteland?

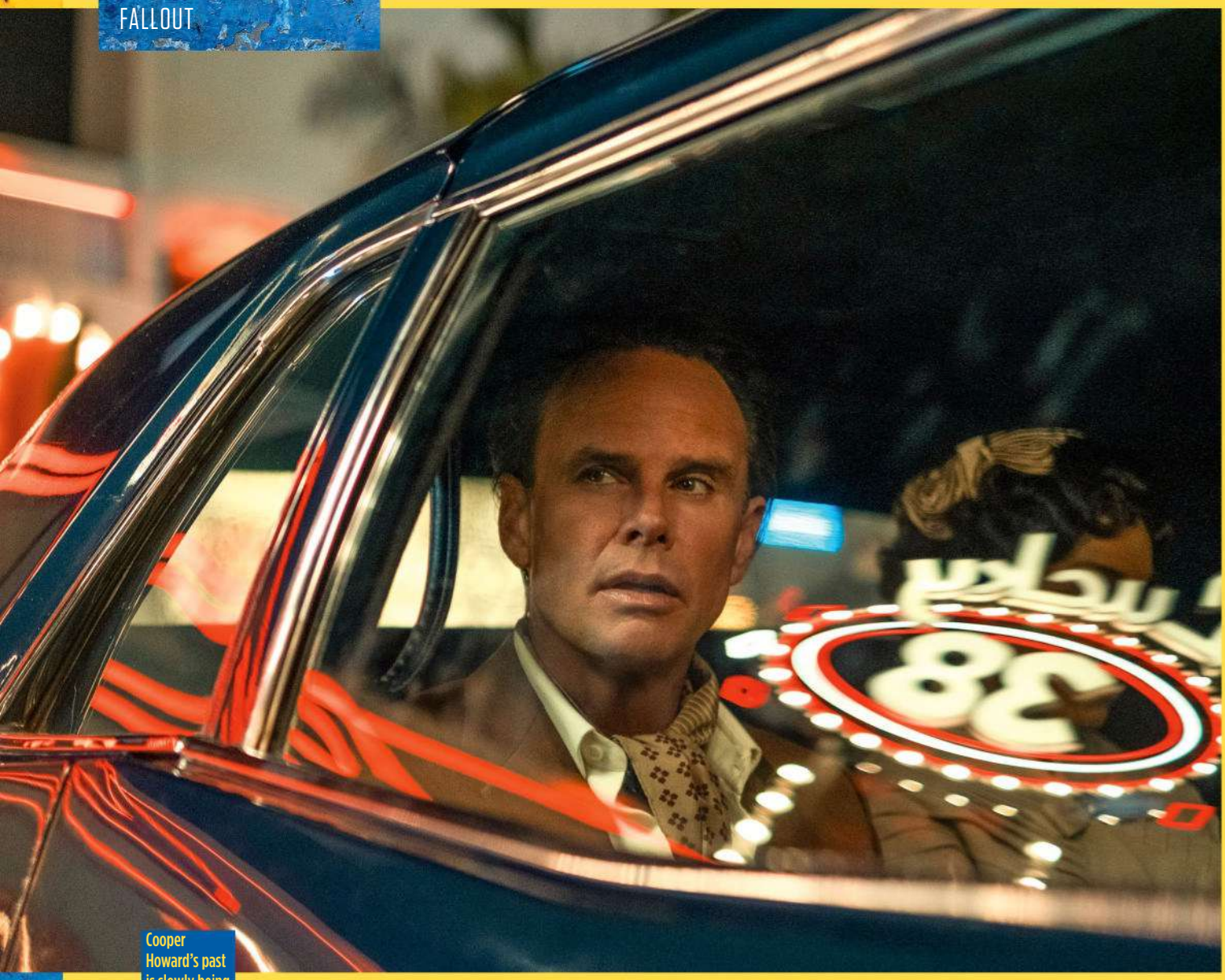
Where do we find Lucy at the start of the new season?
When we pick up season two, she's on this buddy road trip with The Ghoul and she's really trying to uphold her values. She's trying to continue to live by her rules, which is to not kill and believe in the goodness of people, but there is this little part of her that is broken. Part of her is heartbroken and angry and feels immense pain – and that part of her gets louder and louder throughout this season. It becomes more and more difficult for her to continue to choose goodness in these challenging and violent situations.

What are Lucy's motivations?
When Lucy found out the truth about her father, The Ghoul gave her a choice. Do you want to find your dad? Do you want to get to the bottom of this? And she said yes, knowing it's going to bring her deeper into the unspeakable horrors of this Wasteland. I don't think she knows what she's going to do when she finds her dad. I think she has grandiose ideas of justice, right? But her version of justice and The Ghoul's version of justice are wildly different.

How would you categorise those differences?
Lucy's version of justice probably looks like something in a court, where you're held accountable for your actions, there's a punishment that fits the crime and a chance of redemption. It's about honesty, communication and good values – but for The Ghoul, it's two bullets between the eyes and we're done. It's interesting, because when she meets her dad, how she responds is very different from how she thinks she's going to respond.

How much do you enjoy the stunts and the action of the show?
Stunts are probably my favourite part of acting. They are the days everyone dreads, but they are the days that I really look forward to because I love chaos.

What excites you the most about season two?
The Deathclaws! Gosh, it's so exciting. There are so many creatures from the games that you are going to see. There's also a very fun moment, which I'll tease. I want to say it's in episode four and five, where we see a side of Lucy that we have not seen before. It's when she meets The Kings for the first time. It's a side of Lucy that even I didn't see coming. It's very, very, very fun.



Cooper Howard's past is slowly being revealed.

GHOUL RUNNINGS

Walton Goggins (Cooper Howard/The Ghoul) talks Dogmeat, Deathclaw and long days on set

What are you most excited for audiences to see in season two?
It's batshit crazy, man! It's a vibe. I've been doing this long enough to know that if you tell a story in season one that resonates with people, you have the opportunity to transcend that in season two, because the foundation has been laid. We get to expand in ways that are organic to the story and not gratuitous. It's something very, very special.

How does season two compare to season one?
I think I understand who the Ghoul is now. Cooper Howard? Not so much. I understood who he was in season one up until the point where he realised that his wife was one of the principal architects for the ending of the fucking world, right? This is a man whose world changed. It was so stimulating to move through his world.

What's it like to come up against the Deathclaw in season two?
When I saw Howard Cummings's renderings of the Deathclaw, I couldn't wrap my head around it. Thankfully, I didn't have to look up into the rafters of a stage and imagine this, because we have puppeteers. It's not a green screen; there are puppeteers manning this thing. It's cumbersome and it's weird, but they're doing the work to intimidate us. It's incredible.

What are the challenges of working with canine actors, such as the pooch who plays Dogmeat?
It is not easy, man. I've worked with dogs a number of times over the course of my life – as have a lot of actors. Any one of them will tell you that you're not number one on the call sheet; they are. It's a lot to take in. It's very stimulating for anyone, let alone this beautiful creature who plays Dogmeat. It's a lot, so those days are as long as they need to be to get what we need to tell the story.

Have you seen any episodes of season two?
I watched the first two episodes last night by myself, because I wouldn't let my wife and my son watch them. On the other side of it, my wife asked, "How was it?" And I said, "It's un-fucking real!" If you look at any corner of the screen, there's something beautiful going on. Every corner is specific. If you watch it more than once, look where the camera's *not* asking you to look. There's so much going on. What's happening over here in this mountain range that you're flying over? It's so cool to see.

What would fans be surprised to hear about the show?
Season one was about laying the foundation of what could be possible in this world. Season two organically picks up right where season one left off – and then takes it to places that none of us could have anticipated. Even the writers. There are so many great things out there that create this world, but this place holds a very special place in my heart. I can't wait for everyone to see it.

Norm (Moisés Arias) has to deal with Vault 31 life.

Justin Theroux makes his debut as Robert House.

HOUSE RULES

Executive producer Jonathan Nolan on the conniving new character: Robert House

"There are so many wonderful characters in the *Fallout* games," Nolan tells *SFX*. "For me, one of the most fascinating is House (Justin Theroux). From the beginning, one of the most exciting things about this project has been the plan to tell an original story. This is a little like my experience in the Batman universe, because you're encouraged to tell an original story – but you have all of this wealth and all of these treasures around you. House is one of those treasures. You engage with him in New Vegas as if he's the bad guy. At first, you can't quite get a handle on him. To be honest, I don't think you ever get a handle on House, because he has that mindset of, 'He knows better and he's going to save the world whether or not it wants to be saved. And he's going to do it his own damn way.' House is a fascinating character. I was delighted that Geneva wanted to go there in season two."

> **"Howard Cummings brings the games to life in a more grand way than I anticipated"**

like being immersed in an IMAX movie, but bigger.

"Shooting *Fallout* is a team effort with our extraordinary production designer Howard Cummings, as well as our extraordinary special effects and prop teams," explains executive producer Jonathan Nolan. "From the beginning, our approach was to use every tool under the sun to build a world this big and this compelling, and to honour the games. The underlying philosophy is to always start with reality; to always put as much reality in front of that film camera as we can and to use special techniques, but to never leave a technique out because of dogmatic reasons."

It feels like no expense is spared, with everything shot on 35mm film and some jaw-droppingly expansive sets. Nolan continues: "We use the volume for a relatively small amount of our production days, but we use it for sets that would otherwise be impossible or impractical. We use it for vehicles or environments that you simply can't shoot practically and it works beautifully for that. We use practical effects when we can and we use visual effects when we can't. We have the most talented visual effects artists in the world and we try to give them as little to do as possible. It's a true team effort."

CLAW IT BACK

When it comes to the new sets for season two, some iconic locations from the game have been recreated for the small screen, including New Vegas and Novac. "Howard Cummings brings these games to life for us – and for the fans – in a more grand way than I could have ever anticipated when we were writing the first episode of the first season," explains showrunner Geneva Robertson-Dworet.

"Howard's attention to detail is beyond belief. Even the design of the screws in the vault are true to the game. He just nails even the most minute of details like that. I was really excited to see how he'd bring Freeside to life in New Vegas, but also to see what he created in terms of new locations that are not riffs on the games themselves. There are new characters and new places in the Wasteland that are phenomenally beautiful – and he created them from scratch and from his imagination."

"The locations are probably the most incredible locations I've ever visited in my life," adds Ella Purnell, who plays Lucy MacLean. "The sets are the most beautifully detailed, well thought-out sets I've ever seen, and I'm so excited for everyone to see them. There's so →

Maximus has to deal with a leadership role.

GET YOUR MOTEN RUNNING

Aaron Moten (Maximus) on scavenges, sand dunes and season two storylines

Where do we find Maximus at the start of season two?
The first time we see Maximus, he's on a scavenge for the Brotherhood. I don't know how to describe the location. We shot it at a prison, but it's a scavenge for a relic that Elder Quintus has told him is really vital and important for them to track down and find. That's where we discover him. He's in the middle of this scavenge in his T-60 suit.

When did you find out what's in store for Maximus this season?
It all starts with a conversation. We usually get multiple scripts to give us a launching springboard – and then we circle the wagon. For myself, Ella and Walton, we are aware of where we're starting and where we're ultimately ending the season. We know the season arc. From that point, we allow ourselves the flexibility to carve our path toward that arc, but we do our best to be malleable and flexible as we move through it.

New Vegas is a key location for season two. What can you tease?
It's exciting! I can't tell you how many people tell me New Vegas is their favourite. I mean, nine out of 10 people who tell me they've played the games are playing *New Vegas*.

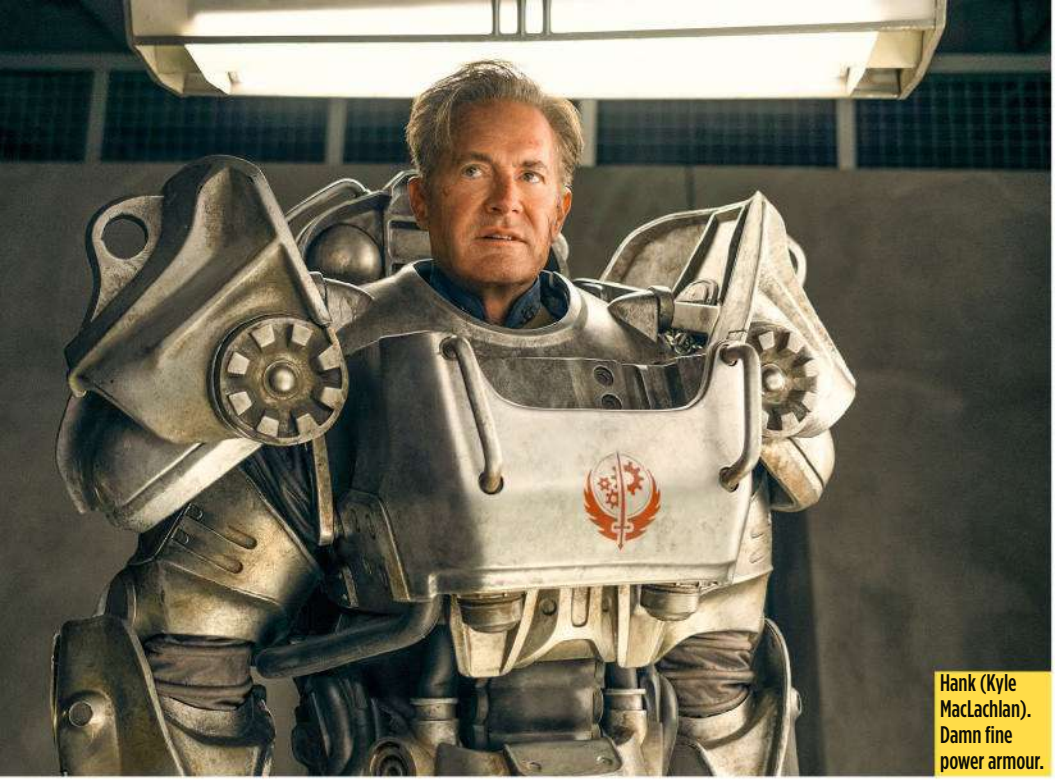
Do you play?
I haven't. I was really deep into *Diablo*, which is totally different but very, very time-consuming in the same sort of way. Now I'm working this job, it feels like I'll keep pushing the buttons with the Bethesda guys to try and let me play *Fallout 5* early or something. I'll wait until I'm done being a person in this world to take control of it in a different way.

Which *Fallout* location impressed you the most in season two?
I have to tell you about the Dumont Dunes. They are these amazing sand dunes in Barstow, which is about a four-hour drive from Los Angeles. In the salt flats in our first season, we made sure there are no footprints in the sand as if it is the Wasteland. When you see a character trotting through these spaces, they are creating footprints in the sand for maybe the first time in months or whatever. It's always fun to shoot.

What was your first experience on the volume set?
My first day on the volume set was my very first day of season one – but it was in New York. This volume is a little different. It's taller. It's more curved. We moved the filming to California for season two.

What aspect of the show are you most excited for fans to see in season two?
I always make the joke that we're only eight hours into our gameplay in a world where people spend 400/500/600 hours. In that sense, it always feels like we always have so much more to mine – even when this season finishes. I think fans are going to be excited to see many of the things come to life that they've wanted to see, but there's always going to be more.

STOCK ART: WIRATGASEM, COLORS HUNTER - CHASSEUR DE COULEURS/GETTY



Hank (Kyle MacLachlan). Damn fine power armour.

Meet Walton Goggins pre-becoming The Ghoul.

Frances Turner is Vault-Tec executive Barb Howard.

much more that isn't in the teaser trailer that I can't talk about, but you'll soon see. We get to meet so many of the factions and creatures and characters from the game. There are so many fun little Easter eggs. I think people are really going to freak out about season two."

Altman teases that there are Easter eggs from season one that remain undiscovered. "People will find them eventually," he admits, with a smile. "Some are definitely harder to spot than others. I was having this debate with someone recently: what is an Easter egg versus a game reference? There are game references everywhere, literally. In terms of Easter eggs, I think of things that have been hidden deliberately as additional world detail or as a fun gamers' inside reference to a scene or location from the game. I place a lot of them. It's definitely an underrated pleasure of my job. We've got a couple of really delicious Easter eggs in season two that I can't wait for people to uncover."

The Deathclaw is another juicy (and violent) treat from the game that will be brought to life in season two. "I'm really fucking excited about Deathclaws," exclaims Altman. "Deathclaws are among the most iconic creatures in all of *Fallout*. In season one, the world of *Fallout* was so big that it was impossible for us, or it would have been imprudent for us, to try to do everything. I think it was a far smarter choice for us to take our time and live in the world a little bit – and then introduce new elements, even beloved ones like the Deathclaw, over time. One of the things I'm most excited about for season two is getting to see the iconic Deathclaw."

> **"One of the things I'm most excited about is getting to see the iconic Deathclaw"**

Purnell agrees. "For someone who's been playing the game for 20 years, I can only imagine how cool it is to see things like [Dinky] the T-Rex and all of these new factions, as well as the Deathclaw, the Gulper and the Yao guai. I can only imagine how cool that feels for them and I never take that for granted. I don't underestimate how nostalgic, important and special that feels."

THE LONG WALK

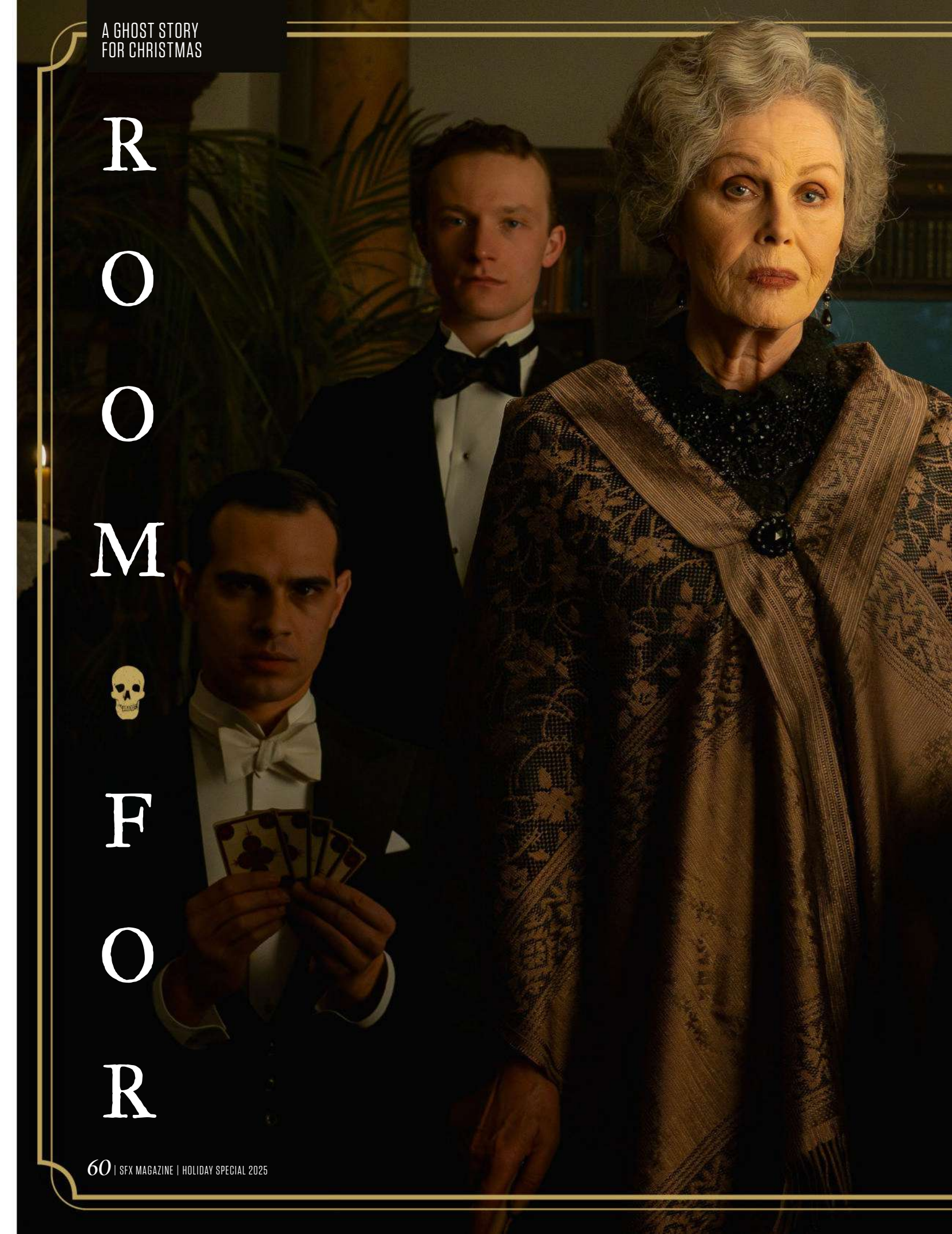
In terms of the story of season two, the action picks up quickly after the explosive season one finale. "Lucy and The Ghoul (Walton Goggins) are in the Wasteland," explains Altman. "It's a short amount of time after we left them at the end of season one. It's been days, not hours, and they are on their way to Vegas on foot."

The very first scene shot for season two involved Norm MacLean (Moisés Arias). "Day one was 7 November 2024," recalls Altman. "It was Norm in Vault 31. He's been left in Vault 31 and is trying to survive in the vault that was different to his expectations. How he survives, you'll have to watch."

With season three greenlit, the team is already considering new places for the story to visit. "Sure, we're holding back a ton of stuff from the games – but I don't know if I want to say what they are, because that would hint at where we hope to go in the future," teases Altman. "The world of *Fallout* is enormous. There are a lot of amazing creatures, characters, places and factions – and we want to get to as many as we can, but we need to be careful about how and when those things are introduced. We'll get there eventually."

Fallout is on Prime Video from 17 December.

ROOM FOR



ONE MORE

MARK GATISS INVITES US INTO THE ROOM IN THE TOWER TO TELL US

A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

Gatiss at work on his eighth Christmas ghost story.

IT'S MID-APRIL, AND *SFX* IS AT Cobham Hall in Kent on day three of a five-day shoot for *The Room In The Tower*. Adapted from EF Benson's 1912 short story, Mark Gatiss' latest *Ghost Story For Christmas* is the first to be filmed before autumn – a shift made to accommodate his ever-hectic schedule.

Outside, the spring sun blazes and the crew slather on sun cream; inside, it's mercifully cool. Producer Isibéal Ballance leads us through the labyrinthine boarding school, past rows of period costumes on hangers, and into a bookshelf-lined annex that, only yesterday, stood in as a drawing room. "It's funny what a big plant can do to the set," she laughs.

We head down into the depths of the building, where a wartime tube station shelter is taking shape. On a nearby bench, a teddy bear, a toy biplane and a pair of child's plimsolls sit neatly arranged. We end up in a classroom turned makeshift production base, piled high with chairs, cables and camera cases. Every so often, a door to the outside creaks open and slams shut with a crash. The breeze... or Christmas spirit come early?

To one side, several crew members and actor Tobias Menzies – his face streaked with dirt and blood, a heavy jacket thrown over his hospital gown costume – huddle around a monitor as a scene is filmed down the corridor. The panelled chamber on screen serves as the titular tower.

Here, Dame Joanna Lumley – draped in a flowing white dress, her face hidden, rather eerily, beneath a veil – is bringing Mrs Stone to life. No, not *that* Mrs Stone. But as she addresses the crew with a steady stream of honeys, darlings and sweethearts, it's hard not to hear echoes of the flamboyant television character she's best known for.

Lumley seems fully absorbed in her role, asking questions, adjusting her costume ("Every ragged veil matters!") and making sure everyone's happy with her performance. Someone asks her to shuffle two inches to the left, and once she's found the blue light guiding her eyeline to the camera – since she can hardly see through the veil – filming begins. "I knew you would come to the room in the tower," she rasps, her voice chillingly deep and gravelly. "I have waited long for you. At last, you have come..."

"Somebody's enjoying themselves!" a crew member remarks after a few retakes – each one raspier than the last – prompting laughter all round.

MONSTER MAKING

We catch up with Gatiss during a brief break to ask how filming is going. "Good, the usual madness!" he laughs. "Too much to do and no time. But good. I'm very pleased." He tells us that we've just missed one of the shoot's unexpected stars. "He was absolutely marvellous," Gatiss beams, referring to Bob the dog. "He was eminently directable, because he'd do anything for food. He had to stare out onto the lawn where there's something bad. I just stood on the other side of the doors with a bag of treats, and he looked exactly where I wanted him to!"

> **"It looks gorgeous and there are all these different slices of time to enjoy"**

As for another of the production's standout turns, Gatiss says Lumley's name came to him early on. "It's a small part," he explains, "but she has to malignly influence the entire story. I wanted someone with presence. It's all about presence. I was very lucky that she said yes."

Back on the monitor, a crew member gently lowers Lumley's shawl, revealing a glimpse of a hideous transformation beneath. "It's horrifying – it's extraordinary!" she exclaims. Lumley looks unlike anything we've ever seen her play before – absolutely fiendish, you might say.

The creation – which we won't describe in detail – comes courtesy of special effects make-up veterans Dave and Lou Elsey, whose previous *Ghost Story* work includes the Mummy in 2023's *Lot No. 249*. "We look forward to these," Dave tells us later. "They're always a treat to do."

Ballance is equally delighted to have the pair back on set. "I had to email them last year and say, 'I'm really sorry, there's no gory things!' It was no fun last year. It was just a strangulation," she laughs, recalling *Woman Of Stone*. "Just a boring strangulation," Elsey deadpans. "But we're back!"

Before today's shoot, the pair had taken a mould of Lumley's face; this morning they carefully built up her prosthetics, layer by layer. "There's a forehead piece, two cheek pieces, about six neck pieces including a big neck wound, a nose piece and an eye socket,"

SPOOK STORIES

Adapting EF Benson

Writer EF Benson is perhaps less well known for his ghost stories than the authors Gatiss has previously adapted, MR James and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. "In the ghost community he is very famous," Gatiss counters. "But that's the weird thing. In his day, he was more famous for his what he called 'spook stories' than he was for *Mapp And Lucia*, which is what he's known for now." That's a series of six 1920s-set comic novels which have twice been adapted for television.

"He was a masterful comic writer, but also a brilliant writer of ghost stories. What I've always loved is that his stories actually occupy a very similar territory to *Mapp And Lucia*. They're often about middle-aged bachelors who take a summer's lease on a house in a little village. Sometimes the consequences are comical and sometimes they're absolutely horrible. They're really great stories."

HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY

We'd give the room in the tower a miss, pal.

Is this the portrait of Mrs Stone from the short story?

Menzies stirs from a deep and frightful sleep scene.

The lanterns and vintage children's toys used as props.

explains Elsey. "They all had to be put down so the edges are invisible. That took a long while." Happily, the more gnarly body parts they added to Lumley, "the more she liked it," he laughs.

Elsey describes the actor as "a tonic" to work with. "Four hours with someone, putting make-up on them and sticking glue all round their eyes – and doing all that sort of stuff doesn't necessarily go well if someone's not into it. But Joanna's a perfect subject, and it's been a pleasure. I only wish we were doing it every day!"

As the team prepares for another take, the conversation drifts – for one reason or another – to the character of Nosferatu. We also catch mentions of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. "Did Gary Oldman glide about in that?" Lumley asks, referring to his title role. She knows a thing or two about vampires – her last horror outing, back in 1973, was Hammer's *The Satanic Rites Of Dracula*.

"How's it going?" someone asks. "I'm loving it – it's absolutely divine!" she replies. No sooner has she responded than another crew member calls out the same question. "I'm okay, honey – I've got *men* around me!" she replies brightly.

For the final shot of the sequence, Lumley's teeth are blackened. "I don't want you to think these are *my* teeth – I've had a bit of work done on them!" she jokes. The crew move →

TURN TO STONE

Joanna Lumley on returning to genre

How was working with Mark Gatiss?
Mark is a staggering brainbox and also the kindest and funniest person to be with. And it was lovely to work with Tobias Menzies again; we did *The Cherry Orchard* together for Jonathan Miller at the Crucible in Sheffield.

How did it feel the first time you saw yourself fully transformed as Mrs Stone?
The make-up took forever – four-and-a-half hours – and I couldn't see any part of the process as I was lying back in the chair. When I saw myself in the mirror, I literally felt I had died and gone to hell and back: it was utterly brilliant and terrifying.

What's the most unexpected way you've ever celebrated Christmas?
Doing two shows on Christmas Eve, racing out to Buckinghamshire and arriving at midnight to stay with my sister's in-laws for Christmas Day, then hurtling back to the Garrick Theatre to do two shows on Boxing Day. And our pay was cut.

What's your favourite scary movie?
The Omen. It is still spine-chilling. I saw *The Exorcist* when it came out and shall never watch it again as I was paralysed with fear. Also, *Whistle And I'll Come To You* with Michael Hordern. Screeeeech!

***A Ghost Story For Christmas* marks a return to the supernatural for you, following *Sapphire & Steel*. How do you reflect on your time with that series?**
I adored making *Sapphire & Steel* with David McCallum. It was really frightening for small children, and taxi drivers still remind me how they shuddered in fright when they were young. It was ahead of its time; a forerunner of *The X-Files*.

You were also part of another great British institution: *Doctor Who*! [Lumley appeared in 1999 Red Nose Day skit "The Curse Of Fatal Death"]. How did it feel to step into the Doctor's shoes?
It was such a brief dip into that magical world. I remember the bliss of Hugh Grant morphing into me, the final Doctor in that skit, and of course I was the first-ever woman Doctor. I still sign photographs of me with the TARDIS.

Tobias Menzies and Ben Mansfield. Nice moustaches.

quickly so she can rinse them clean straight after. She's then asked to hold out her arms – made up, fittingly, in the gnarled style of a Hammer horror monster – so that her dress can "blow like a flag". She keeps her gaze fixed dead at the camera. "Wind's coming in!" another voice calls as a fan is switched on. And then, "Nice and quiet, please!" as Lumley's veil begins to billow in the breeze.

"Rolling!" On the monitor, Lumley – gnarly arms outstretched – mutters: "At last you have come..." "Cut there!" "Did it flutter okay?" she asks, back in her normal voice. It's an affirmative. A make-up artist brushes a stray hair from her forehead. "I looked a bit attractive for a moment, didn't I?" she jests.

A few takes later – one calling for a faster lunge forward – the fan is switched off, and her line re-recorded for dubbing. The crew applauds. "I don't know what 'revolting' is, but this must come pretty close to it," Lumley teases someone. "All worth it, don't you think? All worth it, darling!" Somehow, we suspect she'll be reaching for the lemon and honey tomorrow morning.

ROUND THE OLD JOANNA

When we speak several months later, Gatiss – who adapted and directed the production – says he believes Lumley relished her ghastly transformation. "She told me she was out to dinner with Sigourney Weaver after she'd had the first fitting. She flashed a photo on her phone and said, 'This is me without make-up,'" he laughs. "She'd done sort of old age on *Ab Fab* and a little bit on *James And The Giant Peach*, but nothing like this. She couldn't be more up for it – she was an absolute dream."

Alongside Tobias Menzies, the half-hour drama also features Ben Mansfield and Polly Walker, with Nancy Carroll as Verity, who appears with Menzies in what Gatiss calls the "linking sequences". He wrote the role for Carroll, believing it to be the perfect fit. "Thankfully, she was able to do it," he says. Not that he always writes with specific actors in mind. "The inevitable problems of making a TV show mean you could set your heart on someone and not get them. So what I tend to do really is, once I've cast someone, I adapt it to suit them rather than write too generically. But these things sometimes work out."

The Room In The Tower follows a man – Roger Winstanley, played here by Menzies – haunted by a recurring nightmare of being invited to stay in a sinister house. One day, the dream comes true. Gatiss calls the story "genuinely chilling".

"I've always wanted to do this one," he says. "There's something about it – maybe because we've all had a version of a recurring dream. That kind of dream logic is very familiar to us. But it's also a baffling story; you can't really work out *quite* what's going on. Is it a sort of space-time trap? Is there some conspiracy? I don't know – it defies explanation. It was a real headfuck trying to explain it to everyone. That's an EF Benson term," he quips.

As Gatiss explained on set, "We're doing a lot of repetition, because the dream climaxes with Roger entering the room in the tower in 1906, 1918, 1925, 1930 and then finally in reality – in 1939." The structure, he adds two months later is like *Groundhog Day*. "By doing it in different time periods, on a low budget, it gives you the opportunity to show off – because it looks gorgeous and there are all these different slices of time to enjoy."

When it came to bringing Benson's story to life, Gatiss was particularly influenced by the 1945 horror anthology *Dead Of Night*. "It ends up being a sort of recurring dream, which was probably somewhere in the back of my head," he explains, saying he wanted the dream sequences – of which there are many – to feel distinct.

"I always think when you feel like you're stuck in a dream that it's like being underwater. There's a strange slowness to it, brilliantly captured by [director] Jonathan Miller in *Whistle And I'll Come To You*: that sound as the professor falls into sleep, and you just hear that kind of..." Gatiss makes a muffled noise. "He really nailed it. That's what a nightmare is like, isn't it? When you find yourself kicking at the bed sheets or crying out. I wanted that kind of quality."

We suggest to Gatiss that, with eight BBC ghost stories now under his belt, he has become something of a modern custodian of this spooky storytelling tradition. "I guess so," he nods, before admitting it's a role he's had to fight for. "It's not easy. The thing is, it's an extinct slot. It's basically a TV play. We used to do them all the time in the 1970s,

"The Room In The Tower follows a man haunted by a recurring nightmare"

HALL PASS

History repeats for the tower

Gatiss first scouted Cobham Hall in 2023 while in pre-production for *Lot No 249*. "We looked at five places in one day. It was the last one we looked at, and it was quite a drive," he recalls. "I remember thinking, 'Oh, no, it's not right at all!' It's got extraordinary architecture, but it wasn't right for the college we wanted. And then it reappeared on the locations list. I thought, 'Oh, I'm sure that wasn't right.' And then I looked at it, and I went, 'Oh my god, it's absolutely perfect.' For this one, it was!"

Cobham Hall has four towers, but the production only shows one on screen, in keeping with the story. "We brought in a bigger room to turn it into the room in the tower, and it's this strange, narrow, panelled room – reached by a spiral staircase, which was in another part of the house, but irresistible. As soon as I saw that staircase and looked down, I said, 'This is the shot!' It's kind of like an ammonite shell. Beautiful."

STOCK ART: ANATOLII KOVALOVGETTY

The cast in front of historic Cobham Hall.

Shoes and toys from another era help set the scene.

Lumley's Mrs Stone wrapped up in her veil.

Costumes on hand for the time-bending tale.

and we don't do them anymore. So trying to raise the money for a half-hour one-off is very, very difficult. But the BBC has been so astonishedly supportive. Hopefully, if we're lucky, we can carry on doing them."

Back on set – and in time – Lumley is away having her make-up removed, a process that, according to Dave Elsey, will take about 45 minutes. Menzies is called to a nearby bedroom set. On the monitor, he climbs into bed, a bloodied gash showing above his right eyebrow. A hand reaches in to tidy the sheets around his pillow. He closes his eyes. The take begins. Menzies stirs, splutters and jolts awake from a nightmare. "And cut! More sweat on Tobias, please!" someone calls. A make-up artist hurries forward with a spray bottle.

"Once again! 86, take two!" The moment is filmed a third time. As crew members move in to redress the set, we slip out into the blazing spring sunshine, leaving them to work on into the evening. "They're very challenging, you know," Gatiss admits, with all his work now edited and complete. "You've got so much to do in just five days. But I'm really pleased with this one indeed."

Life, after all, is but a dream – and never more so than at Christmas.

A Ghost Story For Christmas: A Room In The Tower is on BBC Two this Christmas.

GHOULS ALOUD

What makes a ghost story the perfect fit for Christmas?

"It's a multiple thing," Gatiss tells *SFX*. "It's a lot to do with Dickens, and you can't underestimate that because *A Christmas Carol* reinvented Christmas. That's true for everyone. The fact that that is a ghost story and Christmas is so much a part of our collective understanding of it.

"But it also already taps into a much older tradition of fireside storytelling at the end of the year. That strange thing, which I've always been very interested in, is that Christmas is happy-sad. It is for everyone. The older you get, the more you remember people who've gone. There's something about the tone of the year, which I never feel when it's a new year. New Year feels like a different thing, it feels like a sort of fresh start, but Christmas is always full of nostalgia, isn't it? I'm often saying there's something in the shadow of the fairy lights which appeals to something deep in us. For some reason, like chocolate and orange, Christmas and ghosts absolutely go together."

Sleep in Heavenly Pieces

UNWRAPPING A NEW VISION OF KILLER CHRISTMAS CLASSIC SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT

WORDS:
ROBBIE DUNLOP

"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A killer Santa Claus meets a girl and wants to change his ways?" puts Mike P Nelson to *SFX*. That's the twisted premise at the heart of *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, his blood-soaked reimagining of the notorious 1984 holiday horror. And, as he explains, it's also a way of capturing what he calls the original film's "tonal weirdness".

"Everyone's nice, it's cheery, Christmassy, warm and cosy... and then there's this guy, Billy, doing very bad things," he says. "Somehow, it then becomes a love story – the complete opposite of what the original movie is. This love interest really shifts everything. It puts Billy in situations you wouldn't expect."

When distributor Cineverse, together with original executive producers Scott Schneid and Dennis Whitehead, first reached out to Nelson about directing, the project already came with a completed script.

"It was basically a retread, a little more of the same," recalls Nelson, no stranger to horror franchises himself, having directed the *Wrong Turn* reboot in 2021 and more recently revived the *Friday The 13th* series with the celebratory short film "Sweet Revenge".

"I told them straight out that I really wasn't interested in doing it. And they said, 'Okay, well, what *are* you interested in doing? Do you have a take?' When you get a call like that, you think fast. You go for it, you don't say no. So I pitched my version, which was something I was excited about, and it was different from the original. That got them excited. They were going to be able to do a retelling without just making the same movie again – which, ultimately, I think they realised is not what they wanted to do in the first place."

NAUGHTY LIST

Nelson's film opens with young Billy Chapman witnessing the murder of his parents at the hands of a man dressed as Santa. The filmmaker describes it as a key moment in the 1984 film, which he saw for the first time a few years ago. "I was kind of like, 'Oh boy, this is a big deal. This sort of happening *has* to be in the movie.' Obviously I do my own take, but there needs to be that turning point for Billy that changes him.

"And then," the writer/director continues, "it becomes about a young man trying to come to terms with what happened, wondering how he can move on, even though there's something going on in his brain that he's dealing with. Let's just put it that way."

One of Nelson's biggest storyline changes was dropping the orphanage subplot. "That's not really a modern-day thing any more, honestly," he says. Instead, his film introduces a variation involving foster parents. "And it's subject matter that I actually didn't want to really get into," he continues, referring to the original film's scenes in which Billy and the other orphans are beaten by the Mother Superior. "We do get into some of that darkness at points, but it was less what I was interested in and more about really focusing on →

Billy dishes out violence with all the trimmings.

Santa Claus is coming to town... to kill Billy's parents.

Billy – touching on those key moments in his life a little bit later and starting to understand what he went through and why he is the way he is." The youth's traumatic experience with Santa becomes the catalyst that, years later, drives him to don the red suit himself and punish the "naughty".

According to Nelson, Rohan Campbell (*Halloween Ends*, *The Monkey*) brings "a real-person vibe" to the role. "He's someone you connect with right off the bat," Nelson says. "He makes Billy feel universal. And then, when he flips his switch, that's when he brings this larger-than-life craziness to the character. Having an actor who's able to switch that on and off – to bring that charm in a love story like we have *and* that maniacal, murderous darkness, all in the same film – is really special. People are going to be surprised by that and have a lot of fun with it."

PARTY PIECE

The film's poster and trailer proudly announce that it comes from the producers of *Terrifier 2* and *3*, a selling point Nelson insists won't mislead audiences.

"If you're looking for irreverent, violent horror, then that's what we do here," he grins. "I'm not promising [*Terrifier* director] Damien Leone levels of brutality and gore – he's got that market cornered. But we do share that level of dark humour. And we definitely don't shy away from the murder. There's a very high body count for die-hard horror fans – that's something we definitely deliver on."

One of Nelson's favourite scenes to shoot takes place during a blood-soaked Christmas party. "It was extremely challenging, but so much fun," he says. "We had 21 or 22 days to shoot the whole movie, and this was a big, murderous sequence of insanity for many reasons. It was just so satisfying to see it come together and make it out into the world."

Beneath all the carnage, Nelson says there's still a lot of "warmth and heart". "I love making films that let you connect with characters, smile a bit... and then all hell breaks loose," he enthuses. "To me, that's the perfect formula."

Asked whether he tried to replicate the original's grimy aesthetic, Nelson says the '80s filmmaking spirit informed his approach. "We've got date cards in there and stuff like that, so there's definitely a wink and a nod to that era," he explains. "We shot a lot of it in the vein of those old movies – quick and off-the-hip. We didn't have a lot of time to think. It was 'just get in there and make it raw'.

Mike P Nelson directs the Christmas carnage on set.

> **"I love making films that let you connect with the characters... then all hell breaks loose"**

"And then, of course, it's still a Christmas movie," he adds. "I wanted to bring that Christmas whimsy into the background, and so we have some of that, too. You'll see that mix – the violence, the irreverence and, at times, shock, with a little bit of silly which, when you look back at grindhouse movies, is what they're known for. It's that balance of making you smile and laugh and then suddenly you're like, 'Oh dear Lord, you're going there!'"

Nelson insists *Silent Night, Deadly Night* isn't just another horror remake. "It's about making a movie that feels fresh," he explains of his overall approach. "Something a new audience can come into and say, 'Oh, this is cool, this is brand-new,' but also giving those original fans that feeling they had when they watched the first one. Then ultimately doing something that flips it on its head.

"It's my version," he says simply. "If I were to look at a poster and say, 'I want my *Silent Night, Deadly Night* to look and feel like this' – that's what this movie is."

The original film went on to spawn four sequels and a 2012 remake – the Steven C Miller-directed *Silent Night* in 2012. Could Nelson's reimagining potentially spark its own run of follow-ups? "Absolutely," he confirms. "We've had conversations. There are lots of fun ideas to explore. I'm excited to see what could happen."

It seems Santa's slay ride is only just beginning.

Silent Night, Deadly Night is in cinemas from 12 December.

Santa's Slay

Rohan Campbell on being Billy

Tell us about the character of Billy.
There are two sides to the character. I've always sort of read it like *First Blood*, the book that the original *Rambo* film is based on. For me, the movie kind of comes in like this weird version of *Rambo*. Billy's been drifting his whole life. He's living out of a bag. He can't attach himself to anyone or any place because it's always gonna go wrong for him. We meet him in this state of just complete longing – for stability, for something to latch onto – and that comes in the form of love. What Mike did is so genius because it's the worst possible situation for that to happen to him, and it does.

You've played a few villains in horror films now...
There's a lot more complexity to playing a villain. I find the challenge very, very interesting. Also, I love doing blood gags, so that's fun. There was a good four-and-a-half-minute axe-choreography piece that I think is gonna steal the headlines. Learning how to do that was so much fun.

What can audiences expect from the killings that Billy dishes out?
Some of them are so brutal. There's this bow-and-arrow shot that's just hilarious. You know that iconic antler scene from the original? [Linnea Quigley's character is impaled on a trophy deer's head]. There's a twist on that. There was one day where I was running down hallways with a chainsaw, so I had to go home and watch *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. There's some really, really fun stuff. Mike did a great job of getting creative with his kills, for sure.

What's your own tolerance for gore as a viewer?
My favourite kind of kill is when it's also funny, when you're not sure how to react. Like when I worked on *The Monkey* with Osgood Perkins – he was so good at that. You'd have the funniest set-up for the most horrible way to go. You don't know how to feel because it's so funny, but it's also just a horrific thing. That's my kind of kill. Gore for the sake of gore isn't really my bag, but... you know, I get into it.

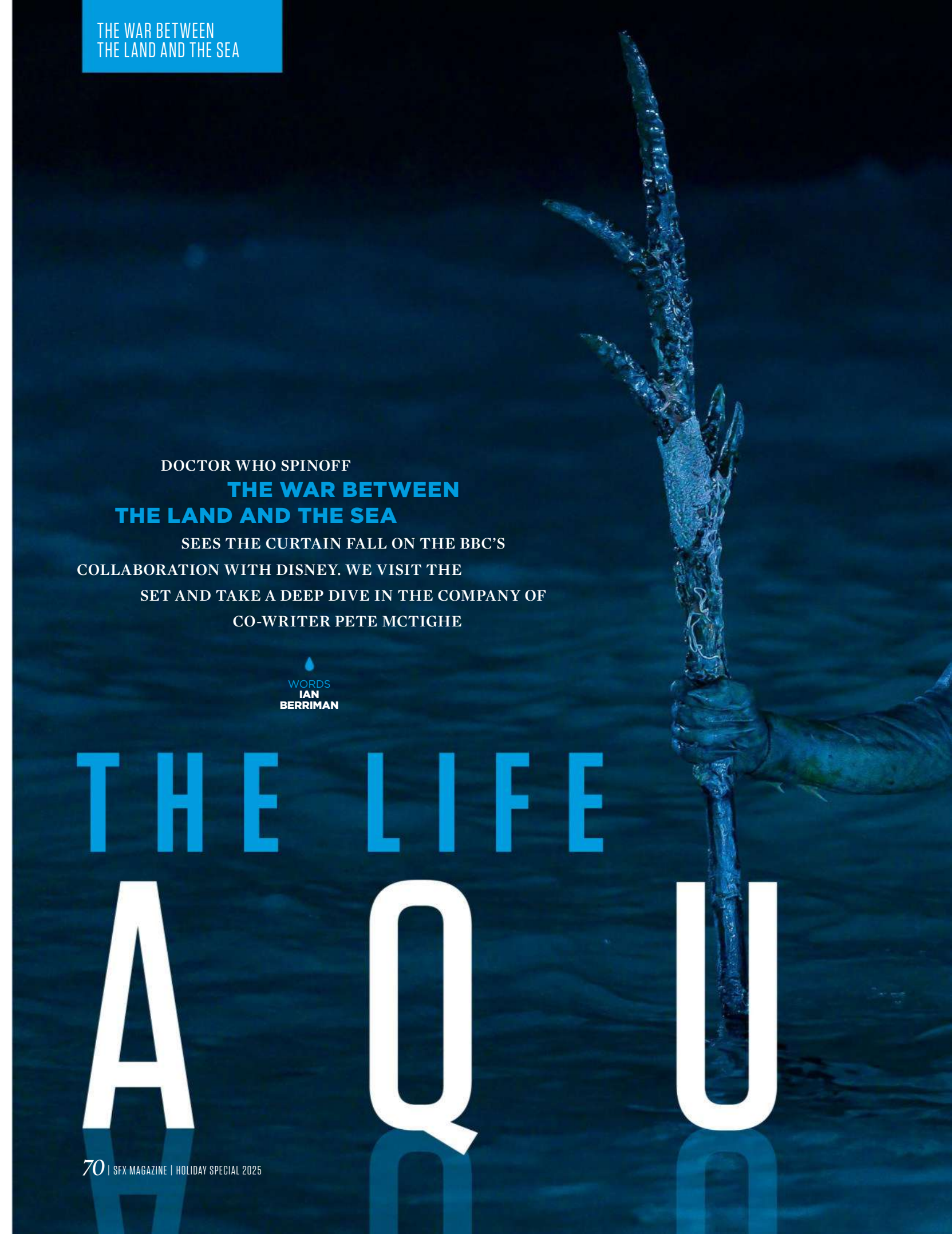
So a mix of gore and humour – is that what audiences can expect?
Yes. They'll laugh. Someone's head's gonna roll and they'll be laughing. These kills become this funny thing where the sweetest boy ever is just doing these horrific acts. That sort of counterweight is really fun to play with.

Do you have any favourite memories from filming?
I'm gonna say the Christmas party, which was so much fun and so crazy to do – all that stunt work and all that rehearsing. Another was a moment at the end with Ruby [Modine]; watching that practical effect happen was really, really disgusting and fun to watch.

Would you be up for a sequel?
Yeah of course. It'd be so much fun.

How do you feel about being one of the few male scream queens?
I just keep finding myself in this position, reading these scripts and working with these people, and I'm really intrigued by this world. I'll do this forever. I'm really excited. I love this genre, and I love doing it.

Have you experienced any Christmas shockers yourself?
Beyond a dog pulling a turkey off the table, it's always been pretty normal. I've got British parents. I'm going to be in the UK this Christmas. It's going to be cold!



DOCTOR WHO SPINOFF **THE WAR BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SEA** SEES THE CURTAIN FALL ON THE BBC'S COLLABORATION WITH DISNEY. WE VISIT THE SET AND TAKE A DEEP DIVE IN THE COMPANY OF CO-WRITER PETE MCTIGHE

WORDS
IAN BERRIMAN

THE LIFE AQUATIC

ATIC

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND YOU COULD BE relaxing in a chill-out room. Open them and you're greeted by some peculiar sights. It's 20 November 2024, and your *SFX* correspondent is at Cardiff's Wolf Studios, where a large green screen has been set up for some "dry for wet" shooting. Gentle ambient music is being piped in to create just the right sort of mood.

One by one, actors stand on a small podium, then sway from side to side, slowly waving their arms. Each has a belt attached to a supporting rail, but it's tricky when you can only see through two pinholes... "Gethin, don't go too mad!" someone yells, as a masked performer in a creature suit loses their balance. A crew member rushes forward to catch him before he goes arse over tit.

In real time, it resembles a comically avant-garde variation on tai chi. When you watch the footage played back at a lower frame rate, however, there's method in the madness – they genuinely look as though they're floating about underwater.

Two species are represented here. There are humans in pressure suits, and imposingly tall amphibian creatures – the latest iteration of the Sea Devils, a race which first appeared in Doctor Who in 1972, and whose *in-universe* history stretches back millions of years, Alongside their landlubber relations (commonly known as the Silurians), they ruled the planet when our ancestors were still swinging about in trees. These two species will face off in *The War Between The Land And The Sea*.

DNA SCAN

Though it represents the final fruits of the BBC's partnership with Disney, episode one of this unwieldily-titled spinoff series was actually the first script produced by Russell T Davies after his restoration to the crown of Overlord of the Whoniverse – penned before 2023's David Tennant specials.

The five-parter is a collaboration between Davies and Pete McTighe, who has three *Who* episodes under his belt. McTighe – writer of episodes two and three, and co-writer of episode four, is on set every day as an executive producer. We pull up a couple of chairs for a chat just a stone's throw from the standing set for UNIT's Ops Room. That won't actually feature in *The War Between*, although UNIT does. "We made a decision to not use it so that we were differentiating the show from *Doctor Who* a bit, design-wise," McTighe explains. "The Ops Room, in particular, is quite sci-fi, whereas this show is a bit different."

Drilling down into that seems a good place to start. How does the spinoff compare to the mothership series? "Obviously it's part of the Whoniverse, so it does have that DNA, but it very much stands alone as its own thing, narratively and tonally," McTighe says. "That was a deliberate thing, to make it something fresh where if you're not a *Doctor Who* fan you might watch this and this might appeal to you in a different way."

The series kicks off with the world brought to the brink of cataclysmic conflict after an inter-species incident, when a member of "Aquakind" (as they're now being called) is caught in a Spanish fishing boat's net, then shot dead. So what genre does it sit in? "The thing about the show is it's *everything*," McTighe claims. "Essentially it's a thriller, but it's also incredibly emotional, incredibly character-rich, with massive action set-pieces. So it's all of the great things about *Doctor Who*, but just a different tone. Its closest relative is probably *Children Of Earth* [series three of *Torchwood*], but it's not like *Torchwood* either. It definitely stands on its own."

Russell Tovey's character, Barclay, provides our way into the story. When humanity engages Aquakind in diplomatic discussions, the latter insist on dealing with an everyman, rejecting the seasoned ambassador offered, and this civilian employee of UNIT is reluctantly thrust into the spotlight. "He's a very ordinary man – he works in transport logistics. He's drawn into this big world event, and becomes

Captain Mackie (Hannah Donaldson).

Civvie Barclay acts as an observer.

Ibrahim is now Kate's boyfriend!

Salt and her guards, in front of the water tank.

MYRKA WATERS

No pantomime horse operators required

On behalf of *Who* fans of a certain vintage, we have to ask: does this series have a place for the Myrka, the shonky sea monster from 1984's "Warriors Of The Deep" (notoriously operated by the same people behind *Rentaghost*'s pantomime horse)?

"Well... there *was* a Myrka in it, until very late in the day," McTighe reveals, "and the only reason it's not is money. There was a scene in episode three, when we visit Homo Aqua world, and we track past this window – well, not a window, it's a portal. You see the darkness of the ocean outside, and then the shadow of this kind of massive dragon passes the window. That was the Myrka. Sadly, we've had to spend the VFX money on something else."

You can always put it in a novelisation one day, we suggest.

"Exactly! In my head canon, it's there. So the Myrka's alive and well."

the most important man on the planet. The show is about how he deals with that, and what that means for his future. It's very much putting an ordinary man at the centre in an extraordinary situation."

This isn't a drama that only plays out in the corridors of power – it also has a domestic angle. "That's the theme of Russell T Davies's work, isn't it?" says McTighe. "Barclay having a family grounds him in reality. And it's a nice bit of contrasting to see how the fallout affects them as well. His ex-wife's name is Barbara [Ann Akinjirin]. Suddenly Barbara's ex-husband is the most famous man in the world. How does she deal with that? What does that mean for her?"

CIVILISATION BUILDING

McTighe declares himself "a massive fan" of the Sea Devils. "Particularly the classic stories [1972's "The Sea Devils" and 1984's "Warriors Of The Deep"] – I think they're fantastic." →

The pearl of the dead Homo Aqua is inspected.

In part one the Med becomes "hostile territory".

But they haven't shied away from making changes. "Because we're able to spend five hours with them, we're able to do a much deeper dive into them as a race. Before, we've seen them as essentially rubber-faced monsters – there wasn't a lot of room for character development. Whereas in this they're not the monster: they're characters, they're people, and they're a culture. It was really exciting to be able to open up that world and figure out what their civilisation is like."

If you've watched the trailer, you'll have seen two different creatures, neither resembling the Sea Devils of old (as last seen in 2022's "Legend Of The Sea Devils"). There are staff-carrying warriors – actors in masks (like the unfortunate Gethin...). Meanwhile, Gugu Mbatha-Raw is plastered with makeup as Salt, whose appearance is – in line with the Silurians seen in *Who* since 2010's "The Hungry Earth" – more human-like.

"There are various species under the umbrella of Aquakind, and two of those are Homo Aqua – commonly known as 'Sea Devils' – and Homo Amphibia," McTighe explains. Back in 1972, a traumatised workman blurted out "Sea devil!" upon seeing one, and it stuck. Here, "Homo Aqua" is coined by Colin McFarlane's General Pierce, a character previously featured in *Children Of Earth* (though the more technically accurate term "Homo Spondyl Erectus" is also sometimes applied). "Salt is Homo Amphibia," McTighe continues. "She's a branch of the species that's evolved in appearance to be closer to humans. Homo Amphibia take charge of the negotiations, with the backup of the Homo Aqua – they're more like soldiers, to the Homo Amphibia's strategists."

There was a practical reason behind this redesign. "For the level of interaction that the Salt character has, we couldn't have achieved that with a Homo Aqua, so it made sense to introduce a different species. From a story perspective I loved that: being able to deepen the lore around the Aquakind, expand their society and show that there are variations in their appearance and their roles. It also helpfully explains away the big difference in the look of the classic and new series Silurians, that there are different branches of these ancient races."

The creatures' 1972 debut made use of Royal Navy cooperation to put Jon Pertwee on diving vessel HMS Reclaim. Does *The War Between* have similar production value? "Very much so," McTighe says. "In episode three, there's a sizeable chunk set on a massive naval research vessel. We found one, drove it to Cardiff, parked it in the Bay, shot on it, and then sent it back with a crew on to do additional shots. Then through CG, we'll put lots of other Navy warships in there. I felt like we were paying homage to the Sea Devils' original story when we did all that stuff. It's a very tough show, as in it feels very military. When you first meet Barclay and he's flung into that military world, you feel every step of that. You're suddenly in helicopters and on boats."

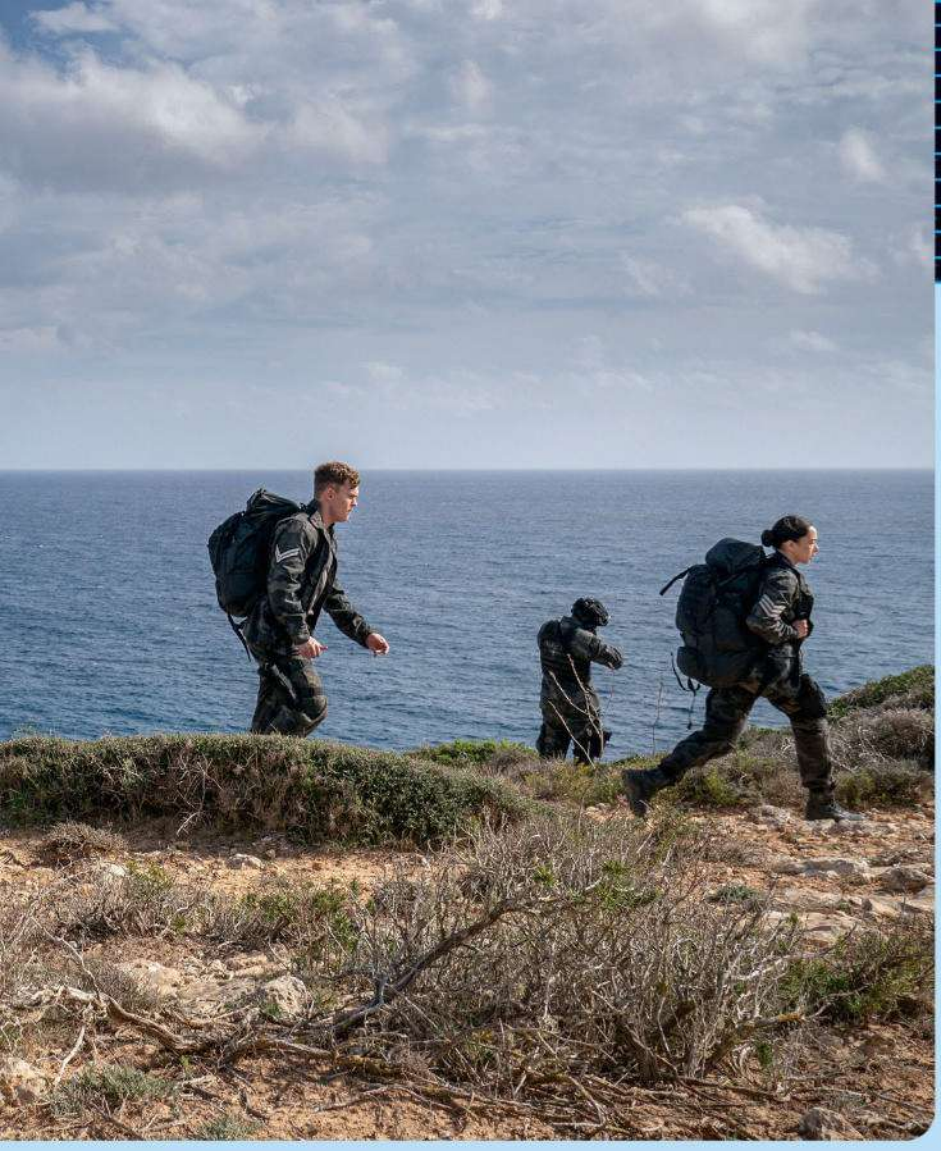
> **"I loved that: being able to deepen the lore around the Aquakind, expand their society"**

Asked what's been the biggest challenge, McTighe plumps for the size of the story. "It's a lot!" he laughs. "When we were writing it, we knew we were

Francesca Corney is Sgt Hana Chakri.

Aquakind reject UNIT'S ambassador.

General Gunsberg has an agenda...



Barclay arrives at the Empress Hall, clearly bricking it.

UNIT definitely isn't just a boys' club nowadays.

writing something big. The scale of it feels bigger than *Doctor Who* – it's huge. So it was how we managed to get that on screen at the budget level we're at, and making sure that the scale that Russell and I wanted translates to the screen."

Production hasn't been confined to Wales, either. In October 2024, the crew decamped to the Spanish island of Mallorca for a week. (Nice work if you can get it.) "I was initially dubious about how much that would give us – whether a week was enough to give us that grand scale – but it really has. It's mostly set in the UK, but we do go to other places, and we've been clever about how we do that, so it does feel very global. We didn't want it to feel like a very UK-centric show. So that's been a challenge, logistically."

The production design department have excelled themselves, McTighe adds. "The set builds have been the biggest I've ever seen. In episode three, I've written that we visit Homo Aqua's world under the water, which is really hard to do properly and not make it '*Doctor Who*-y' in the sense of how in the '70s, if you'd gone to the Sea Devils' base, you know what you would see. We wanted it to feel real and grounded and scary, and we've managed to achieve that.

"When I wrote it, in the scene directions it says, 'There's no floors, there's no walls.' →

A DEVIL OF A JOB

Pearls of insight from the men in suits

During a pause from filming, Homo Aqua performers Gethin Alderman, Liam Carey and Charles Sandford obligingly give us a twirl to show off their body suits (a little reminiscent of the Creature From The Black Lagoon, or *The Shape Of Water*'s amphibian), pointing out the ceremonial armour on their thighs, arms, chest and shoulders. We also learn that they have, ahem, a flap for peeing.

One other detail is particularly fascinating. "I don't know if you noticed the pearls in the neck," says Alderman, pointing to his throat, where one is embedded. "We see at points in the show how these have kind of a communal recorded memory within them. So we show stuff to the humans from here, but it enables us to see things that other members of the colony have experienced as well."

Paul Kasey, credited as "movement and creative choreographer", has been a regular on *Who* for two decades now. How did he conceive how a Homo Aqua would get about? "It came from conversations with Dylan [Holmes Williams, director]. He wanted them to be very poised, very stealth-like. With the walking, we discussed putting the weight on the balls of their feet a little bit more, whereas humans walk heel-toe. When we were in the Empress Hall, and they walk out of the tank, I was at the monitors watching and I went, 'That's not human.' It's a subtle difference, but it really works."

Fans of classic *Who* will fondly remember scenes of the original Sea Devils emerging from the water. Back in 1972, the likes of Pat Gorman had to brave the English Channel in October. Their modern-day counterparts were luckier. While they did some filming on a beach in Ogmore, south Wales, they stood about in the sea in warmer climes. "It was out in Spain in a lovely thunderstorm, which was really good fun, waves crashing over our heads," says Alderman. "The water was plenty warm. But Liam here, who's our stunt Homo Aqua, had to put his head under the water, and he did struggle."

Carey takes up the story. "They wanted me to emerge from below, completely submerged, and then come up. But the suit's buoyant, the head's buoyant, the staff is buoyant. So I had to carry a massive rock out, try and hold on to the rock, slowly raise myself up, then wait for the water to drain from the mask so I could see where I was supposed to be looking!"

That's armour on the Homo Aqua's chests and shoulders.

They're called not-walls, and the not-floor. You're never quite sure where you are in the set. It's a very alien environment. I was dubious whether we could achieve it, or if I'd have to rewrite it to take place on a ship or something. But thank God, they did, and it looks incredible."

Sadly, on the day of our visit, that set's been redressed, but earlier on we did get a chance to explore another. "The Empress Hall is an astonishing set, absolutely massive," says McTighe. He's not fibbing. This is an interior from Imperial House, a building across the Thames from the Palace of Westminster. It's not dressed today, stripped of rows of seating for up to 140 extras representing the nations of the world. With its faux marble and art deco friezes, it's an elegant space, but it looks like they've had some right cowboys in. There's a huge crack running along one wall, and about all that's left of the one facing the river are some ragged remnants of brickwork. In the story, a giant 94,000-litre water tank (realised via CGI) has been hastily jammed into the building. This can be accessed via "the waterway", a huge pipe leading from the Thames. Salt and her guards swim up, then exit an airlock to address humanity.

Walking out of the back of this set, we find UNIT's control centre. A statue of Britannia, holding a trident (apt, given its associations with Neptune) is one neat detail. A bank of monitors shows various TV news feeds; "World's waterways on high alert" burbles one ticker. "World government braced for H20 diplomacy." (In case you're wondering, *Who* fans: yes, Trinity Wells, the American newsreader first featured in "Aliens Of London" *does* make another appearance.)

Colin McFarlane returns as General Pierce.

THE NEW POLLUTION

This isn't McTighe's first time writing for UNIT, of course – his most recent episode, "Lucky Day", saw conspiracy theorist Conrad Clark turning the public against the organisation. Intriguingly, there are some connections with that. "I started writing this in conjunction with doing the second and third draft on my *Doctor Who*," McTighe reveals, "So I could feather little bits of information through. Just little bits of set-up, tiny little things. When you've seen this show, you'll go, 'Oh, okay...'. You'll see those bits of connective tissue."

McTighe's 2020 episode "Praxeus" (co-written with Chris Chibnall), meanwhile, had an ecological focus, being centred on the problem of microplastics, and featuring scenes set beneath the Indian Ocean garbage patch. Similar issues are central to *The War Between*. Indeed (in a sly bit of foreshadowing) the very first scene shows a fisherman thoughtlessly tossing a plastic bottle into the ocean.

> **"Everyone working on the show knows that it has something important to say"**

McTighe stresses that they've tried to avoid being preachy. "It's very hard to do a show that has environmental messages that's not going to be off-putting. We don't want to make a show that's shoving a message down people's throats. But you can actually get away with sending a powerful message when it's wrapped in a sci-fi concept. That's what this show does really well. It's a piece of entertainment, but at its core it has very important things to say."

McTighe recalls how they cut together some footage to show cast and crew how the series was progressing. "The message was very clear, but you don't feel like you're being lectured to, because you're experiencing this with the characters, and putting yourself in their shoes. And it was really affecting. I choked up when I first watched that! I think everyone working on the show knows that it has something important to say, and that makes it really special.

"It's been a dream job," he adds, with a beam. "This is the best crew I've ever worked with, and the best cast I've ever worked with. It's the best thing I've ever done."

Vincent Franklin is the Prime Minister.

The War Between The Land And The Sea will air on BBC iPlayer and BBC One in the UK from 7 December.

STOCK ART: SBAYRAM/GETTY

OUT OF HIS DEPTH

Russell Tovey is Barclay Pierre-Dupont, reluctant ambassador for all mankind

You've worked on Russell T Davies scripts before, like *Years And Years*, so this must have been an easy "Yes".
You're right, it was. The roles that he's offered me have compelled me to take them on, because they are so nuanced and full of emotion, and he always gives me an opportunity to bring humour to the forefront. Growing up, an actor I loved was Robin Williams. He was able to switch between comedy, high emotion and tragedy in one sentence, and that's something I've always been inspired by. And I think Russell writes characters like that.

Tell us something about what Barclay is like.
He's a man who's drifted into his late thirties. He's lost ambition. He just lives day to day, goes down the pub, tries to be the best dad he can, is divorced; he's probably lonely, but doesn't even realise. He's then thrust into this incredibly pressurised position. What I was excited to play is a guy who starts off like a lost child, who becomes the version of himself he never thought was possible through the responsibilities he's given. I think that's the making of him. He hasn't got any purpose. He's just existing. He doesn't really know that he can make a difference. And suddenly this guy is given the opportunity to make the ultimate changes and sacrifices.

It's a series with a serious message – how does it get that across?
It's rooted in truth. As an audience watching this, you can see yourself in his shoes, and ask what would you do in that position – and what opportunities do we have, as the everyman, to make a difference? It's an incredibly entertaining, epic adventure, but there are themes in it that I hope will give people pause for thought and cause discussion and bring about opportunities of change. That's what the best drama does. This is a huge show, but at its heart is love, compassion, and a desire to do something about what we're all not doing anything about.

In your personal life, are you very ecologically aware?
I'm one that has anxiety if I haven't put a bottle in the right bin! I've been vegetarian for many, many years. I drive an electric car. The thing is, what can you do? We need to be presented with more opportunities of how we can make a difference. We're constantly being told, "It's too late, there's nothing you can do." But there is. We have to have hope that we can, as individual people but collectively, make a difference. And we need to celebrate the things we've achieved. For example, years ago we were told, "There's a hole in the ozone layer. The planet's burning." The ozone layer's closed up now – we've done that as humanity. We went "Right, no CFCs in fridges or aerosol cans. We're going to club together and make a change," and we closed it up. But do we celebrate that? Do we go as humanity, "We did this. Collectively as a planet, we made a change. It made a difference. Here we go!" Think what else we can do.

The sets for this series are really impressive...
We shot on the Empress Hall for two weeks, and normally when you spend two weeks in a set you're desperate to leave it. I could have done another month on it! I never left the set between shots. It was an amazing build. We had hundreds and hundreds of extras. It was so immersive and theatrical, it blew me away. And every day there would be a whole different rig – there'd be toys, these cranes and drones. Everything was thrown at it so that the story constantly surprised you in the way that it was being presented to you. And no day was the same as the day before. I was so excited to get on set every day.

THE DARK SIDE OF PANDORA EMERGES

JAMIE LANDAU, **AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH** CO-PRODUCER AND SON OF JON LANDAU, SHARES HOW THEY FINISHED THE FILM WITH THE INTENTION OF HONOURING HIS FATHER

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Plesiosaur-like ilu carry the Na'vi through the water.

FROM THE INCEPTION of James Cameron's first formalised ideas for *Avatar* back in 1994, one of the earliest collaborators standing beside him, helping facilitate its development, was Jon Landau, a trusted producer for his production company Lightstorm. They first bonded on *True Lies* in 1993, and then went on to forge the kind of partnership that allowed Cameron to stay laser-focused on making his films while Landau handled the day to day. From PR to visual effects notes to playing ref with studio heads and collecting the remarkable heads of department, crew members and cast that Cameron wanted, Landau was the guy who made it happen.

So it was unthinkable when Landau passed away from oesophageal cancer in July 2024, because he *was* the other lobe of Cameron's brain at Lightstorm. While his loss was a shock to the outside world, his son Jamie Landau tells *SFX* that his father was aware of his prognosis and got serious about training others in the company to carry his baton forward. "I was lucky that while he was here and healthy and really kicking, he started putting more responsibilities in my court and letting me roll with it," the younger Landau shares. "When he passed away, the best analogy is something that Jim said, which was, 'If you have a bowl of marbles and in the middle is this big marble, you take that out and there's not – all of a sudden – this big hole. All the other marbles fill that space.'"

Having started as a production assistant on *Avatar*, Jamie says he was first encouraged to learn by observation the vital parts of production. He then became a member of the performance capture troupe in New Zealand working on *Avatar: The Way Of Water* and the latest sequel, *Avatar: Fire And Ash*. And now he's a co-producer on the franchise. "I love these movies so much, and my brain is just filled with information on *Avatar*. It's been a dream to be able to stay on through the entire process and see every facet of it." He hopes that the whole team coming together for Cameron in the wake of his dad's passing is something that would make the elder Landau very proud to see.

"He was a larger-than-life person, and I don't think one person could fill his role," Jamie says of his father. "So there have been a lot of us that have really stepped up to the plate. Brigitte Yorke, Maria Battle-Campbell, who are co-producers with me, and Ray Santini, our executive producer and president of Lightstorm. We've all taken strands and taken up the responsibility to help finish this thing, because bringing in somebody from the outside at this point wouldn't work."

While it's been three years since *The Way Of Water* hit cinemas, Landau says audiences will discover that it's only been weeks on Pandora since the tragic death of Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri's (Zoe Saldaña) 16-year-old son Neteyam (Jamie Flatters). He was victim of the RDA's massive attack on their family and their new home among the Na'vi Metkayina Clan.

> **"It's been a dream to be able to stay on through the entire process and see every facet of it"**

"For the Sully family, their physical wounds are still healing from the last battle, and their emotional wounds are so open and wide," Landau explains. "They've lost a son, a brother and a best friend. The key phrase that sticks in my mind from *The Way Of Water* is, 'This family is our fortress', but can you still hold onto a phrase like that when part of your family has been ripped away?"

A NEW THREAT

The humans of the RDA and their recombinant version of Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) certainly haven't given up their mission to obliterate the Sullys so they can mine Pandora for its resources without resistance. This time, Quaritch will find unexpected allies from the Mangkwan Clan, or the Ash People, a Na'vi clan who exist on a desolate wasteland that is almost a blight on Pandora.

Landau says their brutal leader Varang (Oona Chaplin) will be a dramatic contrast for the Sullys, who have only known Na'vi that live in harmony with their biomes. "She dealt with massive grief in her childhood when a natural disaster fell upon her village, and she felt like Eywa did not come and help them," he says of what created Varang. "To have a character like that, whose grief took them to a really dark place, I think it's fascinating watching our Sully family, that we love so much, sometimes teeter on the edge too. We hope that they can come into the light and just find solace in each other, and I think their relationships together, in dealing with their grief on their own and as a family, is a very beautiful thing."

The villainous Varang, leader of the Ash People.

As a performance capture actor, Landau says he was able to see first-hand how impressive

Lo'ak surfing on the back of his Tulkun companion.

Chaplin's work as Varang is, and he can't wait for audiences to feel her impact on this world. "She was able to come in with some of our movement experts and learn some Na'vi basics. But then she took her own spin on it, and we all followed suit," he says. "You don't really see this in other clans, but all of the Ash People tend to try to stay below her eye level and look up to her. Zoe – who really set the standard for the movement of the Omatikaya people, as she was our lead and was cast first on the first movie – really leads with her heart. With Varang, Oona's choice was that she leads right from her pelvis. It's a strong choice, and she's just mesmerising to watch."

Perhaps Varang may prove to even out-villain Quaritch, who finds himself wrestling with acknowledging that his human son Spider (Jack Champion) has been protected well by the Sullys, his chosen family. "Spider living with the Sullys helps propel the whole story," Landau teases. "Quaritch has this hatred against Jake, but he's found it's not as clear cut and dry for him to just blow them all out of the water. Making this alliance with the Ash People really steps up the stakes. We've seen Jake go against RDA forces, but they're humans mostly, with mass weaponry. But what happens when somebody who knows [Na'vi] fighting tactics is now given the weapons of humans? The level of action that we're able to see in this one is quite a step up from *The Way Of Water*, which was already spectacular action."

Landau says that he was blown away by how Cameron has raised both the emotional and visual stakes in *Fire And Ash*. "I almost figured, as we'd start to see these finished renders come in of our characters, that we'd be at basically the same level as *The Way Of Water*. But the technology does improve – and the artists improve. I think we're seeing an even higher level of truth in these CG characters.

"Everything that Zoe, or any of our performers, did on set is recreated," he says of the clarity in performance that the digital capture is providing. "It really is like digital prosthetic, only it doesn't mute any of the features of the face, or any little wrinkle or twitch in the eye. Every bit of that performance is coming through. We just want to really show that this was all done by people on set. They're performing almost like they're in a black box theatre."

Story-wise, he contends that Cameron is now able to mine these established characters far more deeply than ever before. "We've gotten to know the characters so well that [Jim] is able to go from these moments of big, wide grandeur and big action to quiet, intimate moments that are just as engaging, because these characters have a history," Landau praises. "There's a three-minute scene of just Jake and Neytiri in a marui [pod] where I lean in just as much as the big action spectacle. I think there's some of these quieter, intimate scenes of two characters basically talking that are just as riveting as the big action.

"But he's also stepping up the action from close to the beginning of the film," he adds. "In *The Way Of Water*, in the first act, we had this pretty spectacular scene where Jake and Neytiri are raiding these Maglev trains. It's great, but it doesn't hold a candle to the scene in this film where the Ash People attack one of these Wind Trader gondolas."

With audiences yet to even see *Fire And Ash*, it's a little crazy to be looking ahead already, but it's well known that Cameron has written *Avatar 4* and *Avatar 5*, and that portions of the fourth film were even folded into production for *The Way Of Water* and *Fire And Ash*. However, with budgets tightening at Disney and box office grosses in cinemas being so unpredictable, Landau says the success of this film will determine much going forward. "While we are optimistic, we're also realistic," he says. "You never know, and we're all just incredibly hopeful that we'll get to continue making these. This definitely closes a chapter, but the book is still open."

Avatar: Fire And Ash is in cinemas from 19 December.

WORLD IN MOTION

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH **CO-PRODUCTION DESIGNER DYLAN COLE PROVIDES *SFX* WITH DETAILS ABOUT HIS CONTINUED EXPANSION OF PANDORA THROUGH THE CREATION OF TWO NEW NA'VI CLANS, INCLUDING THEIR BESPOKE ENVIRONMENTS AND INDIGENOUS CREATURES**

The Tlalim Clan, or the Wind Traders

"We started with the romance of a pretty image of a nomadic Na'vi tribe in the sky, and [asked] 'How do we make it real?'" Cole says of the creation of the new sky-based clan. "'How do we do all the lived-in details?', and we thought through it all. After Metkayina village, the Wind Traders and the gondola were the second-biggest challenges for me. Like everything in *Avatar*, it's about connectivity. But they're literally connected, where you have the giant medusoid, which is the big jellyfish, Portuguese man o' war-looking thing, with the gondola pirate ship connected and being towed by the windray. It's a whole system of three very difficult designs. We definitely had to attack it as a whole because you can't just design any of those in isolation. As a designer, I'm probably [most proud] of the Wind Traders and their whole life and system, because it's so romantic and beautiful. But it's also practical. It's a thriving culture and not just a pretty image."

Cole details: "Probably the biggest challenge with the gondola was to figure out how literal to be to a ship, and what's recognisable versus what's more Na'vi and fun and alien. But Jim ultimately had pretty much written the script as if you're on a tall ship, so it's very much that there's a deck and there's a below deck. John Park, Gus Hunter and Wētā Workshop did some beautiful stuff, and then it was refined and finished by Jonathan Bach. It was an amazing team effort to pull that off, figuring out all the different decks and how they work, to the point of building elaborate proxy sets that approximate our virtual world so that all the contacts are correct – nothing's done in a vacuum. We filled our large soundstage with a giant build of the entire deck and the below decks and the rigging. You had the stunt guys doing all their fun Errol Flynn flying around."

The windrays pull balloon-like medusae and airships.

CONCEPT ART BY DYLAN COLE AND STEVE MESSING

Volcanic ash juxtaposes Pandora's usual beauty.

The Mangkwan Clan, or the Ash People

"The Ash People are exciting because they were new," Cole says. "Also, thematically, we all enjoyed the complexity that it's not just 'Na'vi good, human bad'. Now there's some bad Na'vi, but we've also met some good humans. Life exists in the grey, right?"

He continues: "Their backstory is that their home was taken out by the volcano, so they have forsaken Eywa and all the things that the Na'vi cherish, generally, as a whole, they've rejected. Leaning into that was great. They go hardcore, not only on the animals but on themselves. They have turned into these raiders, and they attack and steal and kill and enslave, so it's brutal. We were casting a wide net, not wanting it to be an analogue for a specific culture, of course, but making it an amalgam. In their design, it's very minimal wardrobe because it's all about showing off their scarification, showing off their war paint. It's all intimidation."

Cole says Varang is the personification of all those things as their leader. "She almost has this black magic sensibility. But we keep it in the realm of illusion and stagecraft, so it's not literal magic, which is great because it makes her that much smarter. She understands deception and manipulation and a good show. That's why she has her awesome headdress, and she knows the power of flying around on her creature that only *she* has, the newly designed nightwraith. It's all intimidation theatrics, like when they come flying in with their smoky streamers coming behind them, and Varang says, 'I am the fire!' She is bringing that death and destruction."

Varang rides in atop her four-winged nightwraith.

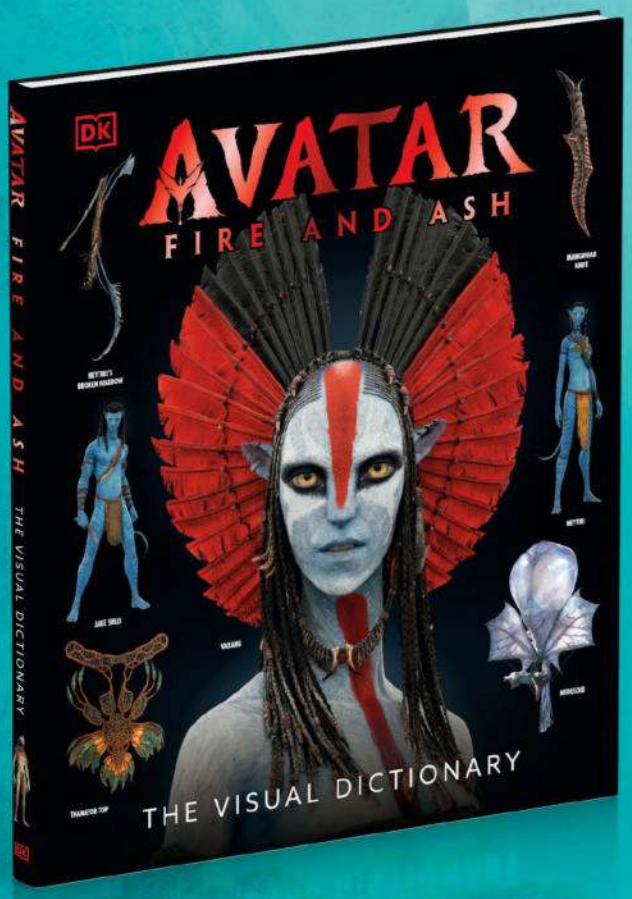
Varang's nightwraith

"Jim's initial brief was originally thinking of a four-winged creature, like the tetrapteron we briefly saw in *Avatar*," Cole says of Varang's mighty creature. "It had two independent sets of wings, a little different than an ikran. Then our amazing creature designer, Zach Berger, did a bunch of silhouette studies. He did one [with] the four wings and what we call 'feathers', and it was totally different from the others. I think we developed four of them to the next level, and that was one of them.

"As far as the amalgam aspect, those little fingers are very much like the wing tips of the ikran, and the face was very much like a creature called the stingbat that was seen a little bit in film one," Cole continues. "It has this crazy face, and he just looks insane. We leaned into that insanity aspect of it. Then Zach had the bold introduction of the crazy horn coming off the head. We thought about how offensive and scary this thing could be using its horn. It also has big talons, more like the leonopteryx. We wanted it big, too. Lighting comes into play with everything we design, and so we see those big wings flare to see the light transmitting that pattern.

"Before her nickname was Ashley, I was calling it 'Freddy 40 Fingers', because it really has 40 fingers. The term nightwraith was actually kind of all new to us, but we were still happy."

FOLLOW THE PATH BACK TO PANDORA



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HOLIDAY SPECIAL 2025

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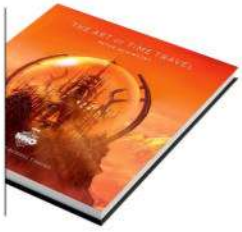

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→ This *Doctor Who* book showcases Peter McKinstry's concept art.

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All was going well until the treadmill was unplugged.

THE RUNNING MAN

Fine sprint

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 133 minutes

Director **Edgar Wright**

Cast **Glen Powell, Josh Brolin, Colman Domingo, Katy O'Brian**

Much more faithful to the source material than the 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, Edgar Wright's take on *The Running Man* arrives in 2025, the same year that Stephen King (writing as Richard Bachman) set his original novel. It's also, unfortunately, the same year a much stronger adaptation of a King book about a dystopian future in which desperate participants compete in a gruelling, life-or-death televised event has already been released. *The Long Walk* tramples over this flashier counterpart, which starts strongly before tapering off in the second half.

The initial world-building is superb, with Co-Op City realised as a grimy industrial nightmare in which the downtrodden citizens work gruelling jobs and relax with violent reality TV shows. In this hellhole, righteously angry all-round good guy Ben Richards (*Top Gun: Maverick*'s Glen Powell) applies to be a participant in one of the big-ticket TV contests run by all-powerful corporation the Network. Due to his physical prowess, Richards is reluctantly entered into The Running Man, an ultra-violent chase event in which three contestants have to evade death by Hunters or law enforcement for 30 days to win a prize pot of up to $1 billion.

> **"Alas, the film is unable to keep up the pace"**

There's a nicely judged level of humour in the first half that helps make the endless despair more palatable without undercutting it. It's there in the *RoboCop*-esque satire and Richards's snarky responses in his assessment; Colman Domingo is also fabulous as the show's flamboyant, unscrupulous host. And when the game first gets underway, Wright's signature zip and energy propel it along, accentuated by some funky needle drops on the soundtrack. In the action stakes, it peaks early with a set-piece in which a towel-wearing Richards (who's clearly been eating a lot of protein, despite not being able to afford medicine for his kid) has to escape an assault on his hotel room.

Alas, the film is unable to keep up the pace. One major pitfall is the game being 30 days long (if a contestant can go the distance). It simply feels too long, given the odds pitted against the players. Combined with Richards's episodic interactions with minor characters who drop in and out, it adds to the feeling that this story might have actually been more comfortable being told on TV. And a couple of tonal swerves knock it off course, with the final stretch too self-serious for such heightened material.

Though King's novel was remarkably prescient, the film suffers from arriving after similarly themed films and shows (also including *The Hunger Games* and *Squid Game*) have covered the same ground; *The Running Man* doesn't add anything new to the conversation, but instead loudly reiterates the talking points. Sure, it's watchable enough, but as far as recommendations go, it's a case of "Walk, don't run." **Matt Maytum**

i Neat in-jokes include a reference to King's wife (Tabby's Diner) and an on-the-money nod to Arnie (he's on the $100 bill).

THE CARPENTER'S SON

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 94 minutes
Director **Lotfy Nathan**
Cast **Nicolas Cage, Noah Jupe, Isla Johnston, FKA twigs**

A teenage Jesus grapples with demons in a Biblical horror whose apocryphal origins – the non-canonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas – permit writer/director Nathan to play fast and loose with traditional Christian orthodoxy. In this re-reading, for example, cuckolded patsy Joseph (Nicolas Cage) is elevated into a saintly guardian who has sworn to protect both wife Mary (FKA twigs) and "son" Jesus (Noah Jupe) from threats both worldly and Satanic. Jesus, meanwhile, is no benevolent messiah, but a headstrong youth only just coming to realise the extent of his God-given powers.

That makes him an easy mark for a mysterious girl (Isla Johnston), who tempts him into acts of disobedience, not to mention lustful thoughts over beautiful mute Lilith (Souheila Yacoub). Might his new friend be the Devil in disguise?

The scene is thus set for a holy battle for the nascent saviour's soul, complete with grisly omens of his future crucifixion and a climactic vision of a CGI hell. Lest things get too ponderous and po-faced though, we also get a few guilty pleasure moments of vintage Nic Cage freakout.

Jesus Of Nazareth this is not, and it's all the better for it. A shame, then, that twigs is allowed to poop the party with a performance as wooden as her stage name. **Neil Smith**

Only a hand remained of the attempted photo bomber.

PREDATOR: BADLANDS

This is the way to expand a saga

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 107 minutes
Director **Dan Trachtenberg**
Cast **Elle Fanning, Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi**

Having revived the *Predator* franchise with *Prey* and animated anthology *Killer Of Killers*, director Dan Trachtenberg delivers his best Yautja movie yet in *Badlands*, which delivers on its USP of making one of the ugly mofos the protagonist without compromising the series' reputation.

With its intergalactic locales, dangerous beasts, speeders and armoured tribesfolk, *Badlands* often feels like a high-budget episode of *The Mandalorian* (albeit a good one). It's also not derogatory to say that its straightforward but propulsive plot feels videogame-like: on a mission to prove himself to his clan, runt Dek (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi) travels to Genna seeking the ultimate trophy kill. "The Death Planet" is not an ironic nickname – the flora is as deadly as the fauna Dek faces on his journey towards the final boss.

> **"A pleasingly uncomplicated adventure story"**

Delivering on the expected hunting prowess (there are far more head impalings that you'd expect in a 12A), Trachtenberg also brings humour and humanity without selling out his antihero protagonist. It helps that the heart is largely delivered via an odd-couple partnership with Elle Fanning's sensitive android, Thia, whose top half is recovered by Dek. Her knowledge is a useful tool on Dek's path towards a satisfying final showdown.

As Thia is the property of Weyland-Yutani, this is technically an *Alien* crossover. But unlike much franchise fare, *Badlands* isn't bogged down by references and callbacks, though fans of the red-dot laser targeting and Power Loaders will find reasons to smile knowingly. It's a pleasingly uncomplicated adventure story delivered with the kind of brutal efficiency Dek's clansfolk would surely admire. **Matt Maytum**

i Trachtenberg says the companion dynamic was inspired by videogames such as *Half-Life 2*, *Uncharted* and *God Of War*.

ANIMALIA

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 DECEMBER
12A | 91 minutes
Director **Sofia Alaoui**
Cast **Oumaïma Barid, Mehdi Dehbi, Fouad Oughaou, Souad Khouyi**

***Animalia* begins quietly in a** wealthy Moroccan home with stylish furnishings and a sense of order, every day rolling out in a predictable fashion. This status quo is disrupted when the skies begin to transform. A storm rolls in, animals act oddly, and societal norms unravel. Alone and cut off from her family, Itto (Oumaïma Barid) has to navigate a world she no longer recognises.

This isn't sci-fi filled with answers; the true nature of what is happening exists on the peripheries. Director Sofia Alaoui builds tension through atmosphere and ominous sound design; a sense that something larger is at work is constant. Noé Bach's camera captures the Moroccan desert's beauty and vastness, while Amine Bouhafa's score adds an uneasy heartbeat pulsing beneath every home and sand dune.

As Itto travels across the changing landscape, the film becomes more about inner change than outer chaos. Alaoui uses the story to explore class, faith, and how even the most fervent believers have to confront that what they thought they knew about the world can no longer be true.

Animalia leaves questions hanging, and ends in a hush that feels both unsettling and true to all that came before. With its singular style and philosophy, it's a wholly impressive debut that invites reflection as much as it delivers wonder. **Leila Latif**

ETERNITY

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER

15 | 114 minutes

Director **David Freyne**

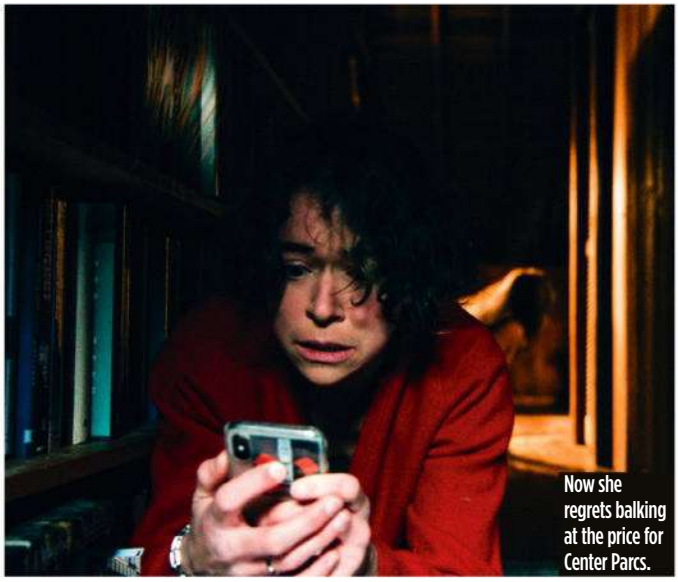
Cast **Elizabeth Olsen, Miles Teller, Callum Turner, Da'Vine Joy Randolph**

The concept of life after death is hardly a new one for film to explore – but *Eternity* co-writer/director David Freyne does at least find some freshness in an age-old story.

We're introduced to an elderly couple gently bickering about vacation plans. Before too long one of them, Larry, is dead, popping up in younger form played by Miles Teller in an art deco train terminal that exists as a stopping-off point for souls who must then choose their "eternity". A veritable Comic Con sales floor of options stymies Larry, who really just wants to be reunited with wife Joan. When she passes away soon after (and arrives in the terminal looking like Elizabeth Olsen), he thinks they'll have a wonderful afterlife together, but that's complicated by the presence of her hunky first husband Luke (Callum Turner).

Freyne and Patrick Cunnane's script is light on its feet, mining a healthy vein of comedy from the romantic rivalries and general oddness of the situation. The three leads are all appealing and handle both the drama and the laughs, though certain scenes are stolen outright by Da'Vine Joy Randolph, who plays Anna, Larry's Afterlife Coordinator.

Visually, the film is appealing and retro, with trips to beautiful vistas. But it's the heartfelt writing and performances that tie *Eternity* together. **James White**



Now she regrets balking at the price for Center Parcs.

KEEPER

Don't let her get away

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 99 minutes

Director **Osgood Perkins**

Cast **Tatiana Maslany, Rossif Sutherland, Birkett Turton, Eden Weiss**

For his second horror movie of 2025, director Osgood Perkins leaves behind the dark humour and Heath Robinson machinations that turned the key of his Stephen King adaptation *The Monkey*, and returns to the controlled, slow-burn chills of 2024's breakout hit *Longlegs*.

Also like *Longlegs*, folk horror *Keeper* has a knack for bottling evil. Come the climactic reveal and the indelibly uncanny images it unleashes, it feels like this cabin-in-the-woods movie has unearthed something truly monstrous, or channelled a spring of pure malevolence.

And yet it keeps its terrors at bay for so much of the running time, relying on shifting shadows and strain-to-catch-it sound

"Like Longlegs, it has a knack for bottling evil"

design as Liz (*She-Hulk*'s Tatiana Maslany) and her boyfriend Malcolm (Rossif Sutherland) celebrate their one-year anniversary by going to his family's isolated abode. It should be romantic, but instead Malcolm's obnoxious cousin Darren (Birkett Turton) pitches up with his Eastern European model girlfriend Minka (Eden Weiss), and it feels like there's another presence in the house, too. Or perhaps presences.

By now, Perkins's directorial style (desaturated palette, off-beam angles and framing) is signature, and he here makes good use of the wooden house's odd architecture, with its high ceilings and unnervingly steep staircases. A recurrent motif of water, perhaps overused, adds to the peculiarity, and *Keeper* exhibits so much arthouse style it's tempting to view it as a means to paper over a narrative thinness. But then comes the finale, when the shadows you've been squinting at are finally given shape. And boy, is it a keeper. **Jamie Graham**

i Perkins says he wanted to make a film about toxic misogyny, describing *Keeper* as "a look at disgusting maleness".

SHELBY OAKS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 91 minutes

Director **Chris Stuckmann**

Cast **Camille Sullivan, Sarah Durn, Sloane Burkett, Mariah Burks, Joe Quinn**

YouTube personality Chris Stuckmann makes his feature film debut with *Shelby Oaks*, a horror movie as patchy as it is creepy, its many surprises sometimes chilling but more often frustrating.

It starts out as this month's *The Blair Witch Project*, as we meet a documentary crew poking into the disappearance 12 years previously of a quartet of YouTubers known as the Paranormal Paranoids. They offer up the standard wobble-cam-in-the-woods footage, the compulsory internet conspiracy theories and the obligatory talking heads, including Mia (Camille Sullivan), the sister of PP's main presenter Riley (Sarah Durn). Emotion levels are high, and Stuckmann consciously taps into *Lake Mungo*, as all clues point to the deserted town of Shelby Oaks.

Then something startling happens. More startling still is that Stuckmann uses this event to drop the found-footage format in favour of a conventional narrative feature. There's no logical reason for it, but the film's subsequent diversions into various horror subgenres suggest that this fan who got to make a movie via a record-breaking Kickstarter campaign ($1.4 million!) just wants to try it all, goddammit.

It makes for a bumpy ride through a host of familiar sights, but there's solid acting, eerie locations and a sprinkling of genuine scares. **Jamie Graham**

WICKED: FOR GOOD

Return To Oz

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 137 minutes

Director **Jon M Chu**

Cast **Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Jeff Goldblum, Jonathan Bailey**

How exactly do you follow a show-stopping number such as "Defying Gravity"? And indeed, a pop cultural hit as big as the first *Wicked*? If you're director Jon M Chu, you're pretty much locked into what has already been shot, since that film and *Wicked: For Good* were made together. Not to mention destined to follow the path of the musical/book's source material.

For Good faces a pacing dilemma: it's largely all third act, the big resolution to something that has come before, but without the big guns of the true banger songs from the first. Yet it still works. Now intersecting more directly with the events of *The Wizard Of Oz* (though Dorothy in particular is, as in the stage show, only a shadow presence), it deepens the emotions while doubling down on the politically-hued message of not listening to fakes when they attempt to use fear to control you.

Once again, it is anchored by its two leads: Cynthia Erivo's angry, righteous Elphaba, fully embracing her antihero origin story as the "Wicked" witch, and Ariana Grande, balancing bubbly with impassioned as she steers Glinda through her own journey.

> **"Deepens the emotions while doubling down on the message"**

The greatest pink/green pairing since the Muppets.

They each get a new, original song here, though neither quite has the power of the show's first-act music, despite coming from composer Stephen Schwartz. And the performers do a fine job of this story's moving track "For Good", a paean to the power of friendship and those who leave an impact on your life.

The expansion of the plot and some character beats, meanwhile, run the gamut from useful (Marissa Bode's Nessarose is given solid expanded material to work from) to repetitive (a flashback to Glinda's youth unnecessarily mirrors the trick pulled off with Elphaba previously). Is *For Good* as good? No. But does it do what it needs to? Absolutely. **James White**

i Elphaba's freckles are designed to mimic warts on regular witches. They increase in visibility as she embraces her power.

THE EXTRAORDINARY LAST DAYS OF JAKE MILLER
THE CARRION ROAD
THE EXTRAORDINARY LAST DAYS OF JAKE MILLER
BOOK 2
IAN HEDLEY
THE RED MARSH KING
THE EXTRAORDINARY LAST DAYS OF JAKE MILLER
Book 1
IAN HEDLEY
Available to buy as a Paperback and e-Book from
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A Dark Urban Fantasy Book Series only for the most courageous of souls

BAT-FAM
Season One

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Creators **Mike Roth, Jase Ricci**

Cast **Luke Wilson, Yonas Kibreab, London Hughes, Michael Benyaer**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Fans of the** Dark Knight being, well, *dark* may arch an eyebrow at this animated series, which is aimed squarely at younger audiences, but they'd be foolish to miss out on a show that puts an anarchic spin on Bruce Wayne's family dynamics.

Bat-Fam follows a bearded Bruce (Luke Wilson) and his son Damian (Yonas Kibreab) in a Gotham that is, more or less, free from crime. That's frustrating for young Damian, who is just itching to get into some adventures.

This "Little Batman" is backed up by a cast of eccentric characters, like Judy and Trudy Dent – the nice and nasty twin daughters of Two-Face, naturally – and Man-Bat, here a sort of eccentric uncle always hanging around Wayne Manor. Having the ghost of Ra's al Ghul fill the role of Damian's curmudgeonly grandad is a particularly inspired choice.

It's lightweight stuff, but the gags come thick and fast, including some that will raise a wry smile from long-term comic-book fans, like Bruce's girlfriend Alicia (London Hughes) wondering why his pet cat – named Selina – doesn't like her, or the Joker casually alluding to having offed Robin in "A Death In The Family". Yes, it's reference-heavy, but *Bat-Fam* avoids feeling like just another DC brand extension by being funny, charming and gleefully irreverent. **Will Salmon**

She only speaks if you roll 10 or higher on a D20.

THE MIGHTY NEIN
Season One
Walk On The Wildemount Side

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Showrunner **Tasha Huo**

Cast **Laura Bailey, Taliesin Jaffe, Liam O'Brien, Marisha Ray**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **This animated** spin-off from Prime Video's *D&D*-themed adventure *The Legend Of Vox Machina* takes us to another part of the fantasy world of Exandria. As with its predecessor, *The Mighty Nein* is adapted from the *Critical Role* web series, where a group of voice actors play out a lengthy *D&D* campaign.

The same cast are back again this time, albeit in all-new roles. Following the theft of a magical beacon, war is looming in Western Wildemount, forcing a group of mismatched characters – it would be a stretch to call most of these people heroes, at least initially – to come together. The show sensibly takes its time reaching that point, however, giving us several episodes to get to know them before they finally resemble a coherent party of adventurers.

The Mighty Nein is a touch darker than *Vox Machina*, but it shares a lot of the same DNA – including some of its flaws. It lurches between humour, high drama, and a slightly adolescent naughtiness. The lengthier episode running times work in its favour, though, giving more space to both the action and the characterisation.

The show is at its best when it drops its sarcastic mask and leans into sincerity as these damaged people find unexpected connections with each other – a scene between wizard Caleb (Liam O'Brien) and alcoholic goblin Nott (Sam Riegel) is particularly touching. Tabletop gamers and fans of the franchise will find plenty to enjoy here. For everyone else, this is a hit, but not quite a crit. **Will Salmon**

i *The Mighty Nein* is based on *Critical Role*'s Campaign Two, which ran for 556 hours and 34 minutes, over 141 episodes.

THUNDERBIRDS AT 60 WITH SCARLETT MOFFATT

★★☆☆☆

UK/US **ITVX, ITV Retro YouTube, Thunderbirds social channels; streaming now**

Director **Unknown**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **Stand by for** cringe. "Is *Thunderbirds* still relevant today?" asks breakout *Gogglebox* star Scarlett Moffatt at the start of this four-episode vodcast celebrating six decades of International Rescue. She swiftly answers her own question: "Yes." To prove her point, her guests include pop-culture influencer Henry Calvert and *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* runner-up Ella Vaday.

Also on a list of interviewees that gives a whole new meaning to "eclectic" are budget-Tracy Island-creating *Blue Peter* presenter Anthea Turner, Gerry and Sylvia Anderson's daughter Dee, Gerry's son (and boss of Anderson Entertainment) Jamie, and *Thunderbirds* puppeteer Mary Turner.

It's all completely lacking in any structure or editorial mission – it's just wheel 'em in and see what Moffatt can get out of them. She mainly seems obsessed with Lady Penelope. As a result, there's precious little discussion about the thing many remember the show for – the actual *Thunderbird* craft. But lots on fashion.

There are *some* interesting insights. Ella Vaday provides very entertaining fluff (you'll never think of John Tracy in the same way again...). Sadly, nobody mentions the live-action film – it would have been great to hear from Jamie what his dad really thought of it. **Dave Golder**

Bring Pandora home and start your *Avatar* collection now on 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray™.

Return To Pandora?

"Your deep-dive rewatch of the *Avatar* movies awaits!"

WHAT BETTER TIME to journey back to the Alpha Centauri star system and prepare for the cinematic event of the season? Jump forward in time and lose yourself in the mid-22nd century once again as you get ready for *Avatar: Fire And Ash* (see page 78) by revisiting the two original movies, *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way Of Water* (2022) which are available on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray™ and DVD.

Much more than you ever experienced on their original release, *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way Of Water* have been brought to stunning new life in special Collector's Edition releases for fans to cherish at home. Both sets are comprised of four discs each, including the films on 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray™.

The original movie comes with a staggering 10 hours of bonus materials and all-new extras, plus you can choose to watch the film as the theatrical version, special edition or Collector's Extended Cut. The sequel comes packed with eight hours of bonus materials, including all-new deleted scenes.

Learn more about the world of Pandora with detailed documentaries, behind the scenes information, production design and scene deconstructions with the cast and creative team behind two of the biggest movies of all time – only on physical formats, available now.

Created by James Cameron, the films tell the story of the Na'vi, occupants of the lush moon Pandora, and the humans determined to destroy their home, working for corporation the RDA (Resources Development Administration) as Earth is on the brink of collapse.

In the original movie, set in 2154, Jake Sully travels to Pandora from Earth and is given an avatar in order to survive the planet's inhospitable atmosphere and interact with the Omatikaya clan. He soon turns against the corporation, falling in love with Neytiri and defending her and the tribe from the mining plans of the RDA.

Eventually defeated, the RDA depart, with some humans choosing to remain on Pandora. Jake is permanently transformed into his avatar, allowing him to begin a new chapter and live with the Na'vi...

In the sequel, *The Way Of Water*, it's 2170 and Jake is now chief of the clan. He and his newfound family have built a life together. But the return of the RDA with dangerous technology threatens their existence once more and means that they must relocate to the eastern seas of Pandora, where the aquatic Metkayina clan live.

But the war rages on, no matter where the Na'vi turn – setting the stage for *Avatar: Fire And Ash*, exclusively in cinemas from 19 December.

hmv

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THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

Lion Country

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1988-1990 | PG | Blu-ray/DVD

Directors **Marilyn Fox, Alex Kirby**

Cast **Jonathan R Scott, Sophie Cook, Tom Baker, Sam West**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Nobody could** accuse the BBC of lacking ambition. Despite a £3 million budget (three times that of 1984's *The Box Of Delights*), adapting *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* in pre-CGI-era 1988 was going to be a challenge.

Even at the time (this isn't just a matter of hindsight) there were moments when it looked less like a drama worthy of a *Radio Times* cover and more like an end-of-term play: comedy beaver costumes, 2D-animated mythical beasts (courtesy of the company behind *The Snowman*), some very shonky CSO (green screen as we'd call it now), and a witch clearly biding time between pantos.

But there was also a magnificent Aslan, some gorgeous Narnian snowscapes, and bags of magical charm. Somehow, the slightly ramshackle TV show captured the spirit of the books. Kids loved it.

Sequels followed, and production standards improved. Series two, which had a more grounded feel, comprised *Prince Caspian* and *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*. They even built the Dawn Treader for real. The ship looked fantastic out at sea.

Then came *The Silver Chair*, with the best two child actors of the entire run, and Tom Baker as their doom-mongering pal Puddleglum. It may not be the most famous of the books, but this adaptation is a genuine forgotten gem of children's television. And that's even with Warwick Davies in a silly owl costume.

So ignore the on-the-nose religious allegory (which is at least faithful to the books) and prepare to lose yourself in a return to a quaintly handcrafted world.

Extras The centrepiece of the extras is an impressive 130-minute making of documentary, *Return To Narnia*. Going through the stories in order, it brings backs the stars of each serial to reminisce at pertinent filming locations.

The documentary also interviews key production personnel, and there's behind-the-scenes footage, which reveals a depth of detail and quality to the sets and costumes that never came across through the standard definition filming the BBC used at the time. It's a wonderful, nostalgic tribute to the actual series and everyone involved.

> **"Captured the spirit of the books. Kids loved it"**

The most emotional moment goes to Sam West (the older Prince Caspian) whose anecdote about how the series marked the end of childhood for him will no doubt cause many a lump in throat. There may be a different reaction to one of the Beaver actors explaining how he spent most of the filming "warm and wet".

Bonus features from the DVDs are carried over. They include a 2003 reunion of the actors who played the Pevensie children (13 minutes); "Past Watchful Dragons" (30 minutes), a 1988 documentary about Lewis that also looks behind the scenes of *The Lion...*; short featurettes on costume design, set design and special effects; clips from *Blue Peter* and breakfast news; and outtakes. **Dave Golder**

The Pevensie parents cried at the tills in Build-A-Bear.

i The Black Knight's horse in *The Silver Chair* was Fury, one of the horses used in the Lloyds Bank TV adverts at the time.

TROLL 2

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 12 | SVOD

Director **Roar Uthaug**

Cast **Ine Marie Wilmann, Kim Falck, Mads Sjøgård Pettersen**

NETFLIX **Reputedly the biggest** production in the history of the Nordic countries, *Troll 2* sees director Roar Uthaug revisiting the Scandi-kaiju genre he mined in 2022's original.

It's a sequel that very much knows it's a sequel (at one point a character even says "Sequels are never any good anyway..."). Loaded with knowing callbacks and cute banter about getting the gang back together, it reunites the main cast in fan-pleasing fashion.

"Troll whisperer" Nora Tidemann (Ine Marie Wilmann) is recruited for a secret research project that's unearthed another of the big-nosed beasties. She's the Fay Wray figure here, bringing empathy for the creatures and arguing for their survival. Paired with a returning Kim Falck as Andreas Isaksen, Wilmann's performance ensures there's an authentic human centre to the pulpy fun.

It's also an encore determined to supersize the icy spectacle. This time Uthaug stages a troll versus troll smackdown, while the final set-piece finds Trondheim under threat of stompage.

But it's a film that also builds the mythology in intelligent ways. An Indy-style detour to the tomb of Saint Olaf uncovers a backstory linked to the rise of Christianity in Norway and its darker repercussions; food for thought as you watch a giant lob victims into its gob like peanuts. **Nick Setchfield**

BARBARELLA

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 8 DECEMBER

1968 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Roger Vadim**

Cast **Jane Fonda, John Phillip Law, Anita Pallenberg, Milo O'Shea**

A breezily saucy, tongue-in-cheek romp with ravishing Technicolor visuals, *Barbarella* is arguably the ultimate sci-fi comic-book movie.

The title sequence, which sees Jane Fonda floating in zero-G as she strips out of a spacesuit, sets the tone. After a political awakening, Fonda would come to view the role as an embarrassment; more recently, she came round to seeing the funny side.

Based on a French comic, it's an episodic affair, with Fonda's astronavigatrix Venus encountering homicidal children, a blind angel, and a decadent Black Queen as she searches for Earth scientist Durand Durand, inventor of a deadly positronic ray.

The sets (built at Rome's Cinecittà studios) are stunning, especially the surreal Labyrinth of the City of Night; the foot-tapping lounge score irresistible. And Fonda displays a knack for comedy as the wide-eyed naïf who finds that wherever she goes she arouses erotic interest – often occasioning kinky torture... Only an abrupt ending slightly poops this shagadelic party.

Extras Paramount's dual-format Collector's Edition comes with three posters, six art cards, five stickers, three coasters, and a reproduction of the sign for Durand Durand's spaceship. But in stark contrast to Arrow Video's US-only 2023 release, the sole on-disc extra is a trailer. Tsk. **Ian Berriman**

It's a Vlad, Vlad, Vlad, Vlad world – we just live here.

DRACULA

Love bites

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!/22 DEC

2025 | 15 | Digital / Blu-ray/DVD

Director **Luc Besson**

Cast **Caleb Landry Jones, Zoë Bleu, Christoph Waltz, Matilda De Angelis**

Who says vampires cast no shadow? From his first, copyright-baiting appearances in silent movies, Dracula has dominated the screen for a century now, endlessly reborn, retold and reinterpreted.

Now it's Luc Besson's turn. One cinematic shadow falls heavier than most in his version: *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which gifted a romantic backstory to the Count that's nowhere to be found in the original novel. Besson borrows the central conceit of that 1992 take as a bereaved Prince Vlad stalks time itself in pursuit of his reincarnated love, played here by Zoë Bleu.

If there are moments that feel like pure Coppola karaoke, the movie impresses when it follows its own path. A relocation to fin de siècle Paris adds fresh colour and flavour, a newly constructed Eiffel Tower contrasted with Dracula's grave-defying timelessness. Renfield is gone, replaced by a lusty, teeth-clacking vampire (a vivacious turn by Matilda De Angelis), while the reliably sly Christoph Waltz is a priestly Van Helsing surrogate, a mortal who's essentially Dracula's conscience.

> **A love story, spiced with dry humour**

As the Count himself, Caleb Landry Jones brings both a louche rock-star swagger and the weight of eternity. It's a compelling, passionate performance, underscored by a scar that trails beneath his eye as if to suggest a tear carved by the centuries.

Besson has zero interest in scaring you. Despite some grisly trimmings and the occasional living gargoyle, this is a love story, spiced with deliciously dry humour and opulent production design. A Dracula with heart, big, bloody and beating.

Extras An interview with Besson (27 minutes), plus three brief promotional pieces (totalling five minutes). **Nick Setchfield**

i The ancestral portraits in Dracula's home include big-screen predecessors Christopher Lee, Max Schreck and Gary Oldman.

DEADLY FRIEND

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1986 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Wes Craven**

Cast **Matthew Laborteaux, Kristy Swanson, Michael Sharrett**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Almost every** movie has something of value. While this risible '80s horror is a blot on Wes Craven's CV, it boasts one niche honour: Most Memorable Basketball-Related Death In Cinematic History.

Essentially *I Was A Teenage Frankenstein*, it centres on robotics whizz Paul (Matthew Laborteaux), creator of BB, an irritating, perma-burbling cross between *Short Circuit*'s Johnny 5 and *South Park*'s Cartman. When winsome neighbour Sam is killed by her abusive father, Paul reanimates her, implanting a chip from BB into her brain.

It's a tragic situation, but that's hard to keep in mind when Sam's robotically walking about, hands held like pincers, the only sign of decay some Toyah-esque blue eyeshadow.

Deadly Friend was much mucked-about, with reshoots to add nightmare sequences and gory deaths. It's thanks to them we have that basketball kill – a hoot-inducing exploding head that, back in the day, was always the worn-out part of the VHS...

Extras Two visual essays (14/12 minutes) offer feminist analysis – broadly reasonable, *occasionally* reductive. Two US critics provide a chirpy, chatty commentary. Arrow also port four interviews (31 minutes) from a 2021 US release: star Kristy Swanson and writer Bruce Joel Rubin have insights into the reshoots; the composer and a make-up effects guy also have their say. Plus: trailers; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

IN YOUR DREAMS

Enter Sandman

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | PG | SVOD

Directors **Erik Benson, Alexander Woo**

Cast **Jolie Hoang-Rappaport, Elias Janssen, Simu Liu, Cristin Milioti**

NETFLIX **A candy-striped** rollercoaster ride through a dozen homages, including *Cloudy With A Chance Of Meatballs*, the art of MC Escher, anime tropes and even *The Shining*. We open with Stevie (Jolie Hoang-Rappaport) fretting about her annoying little brother Elliot (Elias Janssen), until – in time-honoured cartoon tradition – their parents start having marriage problems. Although at least neither of them die, which is a nice change for a kids' film these days.

But fear not! Stevie and Elliot soon find a magic spell that conjures up the mythical Sandman (Omid Djalili), who can grant them a wish for their parents to live happy ever after. Naturally, events are all a bit more complicated than that.

One thing that isn't complicated is the Sandman himself, however – you can feel Djalili straining to inject some Robin Williams-esque chaos into the role, but the script wants him safely tied down. Similiarly, the effervescent Craig Robinson pops up as a greasy cuddly giraffe, but at half his usual volume. The kids are loud, but everyone around them seems rather subdued – it's all disappointingly forgettable. In short: while the two leads are just likeable enough to keep you watching, they won't haunt your dreams. **Jayne Nelson**

ℹ According to Scandinavian Sandman myths, he's responsible for the gunk in the corner of your eyes when you wake up. Ew.

A film about our dreams would get an 18 for horror.

ABRAHAM'S BOYS: A DRACULA STORY

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Digital

This smart update of *Dracula* starts out as a sequel and ends by completely rewriting the original. In 1915, Van Helsing and his family have fled the horrors of Europe for California. But some demons you can't outrun...

Moving the action to America updates the colonial metaphor of Stoker's tale, with the New World offering a whole new perspective on who was really feeding upon whom. It shouldn't work – but, brutally, it does. **Sarah Dobbs**

EVIL LAUGH

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1986 | 18 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Med students** staying at a former orphanage (once the site of murders) are killed by axe, microwave and hammer in this cheapo slasher.

The "Hey kids, let's put on a show!" feel is mildly endearing, but it remains a badly padded dud. The acting is wooden, the camerawork static, the final twist stupid. One character is a *Fangoria* reader; the pre-*Scream* metatextuality his references to Jason et al supply is the one point of interest.

Extras Feature-length documentary; slasher podcast bros commentary. **Ian Berriman**

M: BEYOND THE WASTELAND

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | N/A | Digital

A father brings his naive young son up in the woods, far from civilisation, in this Macedonian horror. At first *M* (as the film is titled in some territories, for Marko, Miko, mother, and more) feels like it's treading similar territory to the BBC's drama *Somewhere Boy*. Alas, it is soon revealed to be more conventional than that – yep, we're back in zombie-land.

Happily, it's atmospherically shot, well-acted, and there's a strong bond between the two young protagonists. **Will Salmon**

THE CREEPS

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray/DVD/digital

The sight of *Highlander*'s Christopher Lambert swinging a sword again is just one of the geek-bait treats in this Finnish horror-comedy. Inspired by everything from *Gremlins* to *Shaun Of The Dead*, it sees a ski resort menaced by murderous, other-dimensional snowmen.

Some cheap, frathouse humour is balanced by the occasional flash of invention. The gleeful trashiness of it all clearly comes from the heart, but the film never quite matches the influences worn on its sleeve.

Extras None. **Nick Setchfield**

SORORITY BABES IN THE SLIMEBALL BOWL-O-RAMA

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 8 DECEMBER
1988 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **David DeCoteau**
Cast **Linnea Quigley, Andras Jones, Robin Rochelle, Hal Havins**

The title is by a distance the best thing about this '80s time capsule. A Charles Band production, it follows sorority girls whose initiation requires stealing from a bowling alley. There they accidentally release a jive-talking imp who acts like a genie. Expect *Porkies*-style voyeurism, potty talk (you may spit your tea out at the way the simile "Tighter than..." ends), decapitations, and longueurs which prompt suspicion they didn't get enough in the can.

Scream Queen Linnea Quigley's punky thief Spider is appealing, but it's all so random it feels like the treatment was jotted down while huffing on a bong. That's probably the ideal state in which to appreciate it. **Extras** 101 Films' two-disc edition includes the 2022 sequel. Expect a retread plot, rinky-dink comedy music, and not one but *three* young women soaping their boobs. Best thing we can say? It's only 62 minutes long. Also new: star Brinke Stevens (13 minutes) discusses dislocating her knee and more; commentary by a Band expert.

A director/Stevens/writer track is carried over from 88 Films' old Blu-ray. So is Making Of *Tales From The Bowling Alley*, a hard-going 137 minutes of fuzzy on-set footage with slivers of director chat inserted. Plus: three minutes more chat; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

"Stand back everyone, it's the fashion police!"

BLAKE'S 7 Series Two
Now We Are Six

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1979 | 12 | Blu-ray
Director **Terry Nation**
Cast **Gareth Thomas, Paul Darrow, Michael Keating, Sally Knyvette**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Is the second run** of Terry Nation's space saga the best? It has the classic lineup of freedom fighters, and a bare-bones arc as they search for Federation control centre Star One.

It also brings variety. Writing all 13 series one stories, Nation fell back on some stock tropes. Script editor Chris Boucher comes to the fore here; "Shadow", with its drug addicts, gangsters and other-dimensional entity, encapsulates the difference in approach. Writer Robert Holmes and costume designer June Hudson also join the team; the latter's outlandish outfits boost the camp factor.

Nation scripts like "Pressure Point" are still enjoyable action-adventure fodder, mind. That kills off gentle giant Gan (David Jackson). But the bigger loss is Stephen Greif as Blake's nemesis Travis. Taking over the role, Brian Croucher feels like a downgrade.

> **Has the classic lineup of freedom fighters**

Extras There are five new feature-length treats. *Liberation* (112 minutes) tackles each episode in turn, gleaning anecdotes from guest stars. *Giant* (112 minutes) pays tribute to David Jackson with the aid of family scrapbooks; his son's a spitting image! *Maximum* (78 minutes) movingly explores the chaotic yet joyful life of Jacqueline Pearce (Servalan) – tracking down her ashes to an antique shop in Bolton! Speaking to Brian Croucher (85 minutes), Matthew Sweet finds topics of much more interest than Travis, like the actor's youthful stretch in prison. Designer Roger Murray-Leach (79 minutes), tends to give straight-bat answers to Sweet's probings. Further goodies include part two of *The Making Of Blake's 7*, a '00s doc with a self-deprecatory tone (59 minutes), and two convention panels from the '90s (48/53 minutes). Numerous DVD bonuses are also carried over. **Ian Berriman**

i For "Killer", June Hudson kitted out a recovery crew by borrowing Michelin Man costumes from the tyre company.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD

John Carpenter's 1974 feature debut **DARK STAR** (out now) is a low-fi SF-comedy following a spaceship crew tasked with destroying unstable planets. We said: "Nothing much happens except bearded men killing time... One for a monged-out Sunday." Fabulous Films' dual-format set comes with two posters, eight art cards, a sew-on patch and more... but the extras (including a two-hour Making Of) are the same as the 2012 Blu-ray. **OUTLAND** (out now) transplants *High Noon* to a mining colony on a moon of Jupiter, as Sean Connery's Marshall takes on a drug ring. We said: "The direction is stylish, but the script is disastrously humdrum." Extras-wise, it's a step up from 2017's Premiere Collection Blu-ray, adding three interviews, a visual essay, an appreciation, and a critical commentary. It also comes with a poster. In 1994's **THE MASK** (out now), Jim Carrey's bank teller is transformed into a green-faced trickster by the Mask of Loki, making an enemy of a gangster. We said: "A stylish and often subtly anarchic slice of big-screen buffoonery." New stuff on this Arrow Video release includes six interviews and a video essay. It comes with a poster and six art cards. Finally, Val Kilmer and Carrie-Anne Moss headline 2000's **RED PLANET** (out now), as members of a group of astronauts stranded on Mars. We said: "Comes up with some semi-plausible twists and turns, but it's not enough... it's really just treading water for an hour and a half." New bonuses here: two interviews and a "visual retrospective".

THE NEW AVENGERS

Mighty Purdey

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1976-1977 | 12 | Blu-ray/DVD

Producers **Brian Clemens, Albert Fennell**

Cast **Patrick Macnee, Joanna Lumley, Gareth Hunt**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A hi-def restoration** of *The Avengers*'s '70s incarnation has long been a holy grail for fans. Finally it's here, bringing new life to a show too often in the leather-clad shadow of its predecessor.

The tone straddles the whimsy of the '60s and something just a little grittier: tales of giant rats and marauding Cybernauts take place in a harder-edged world that anticipates *The Professionals*. It's pacy, witty and crammed with action – a colourful last hurrah for Steed & co that gave a starmaking role to Joanna Lumley, legendary mushroom cut and all.

Extras Lumley is among the names providing nine new audio commentaries for this Studiocanal set – many with picture-in-picture option (there are also two archival tracks with Hunt and producer Brian Clemens). The same faces present intros for some episodes.

A retrospective delivers nuggets of production history – did you know Lewis Collins auditioned for the role of Gambit? – and finds Lumley announcing, "I'm going to say the C word – classic!" (36 minutes). She also reflects on her Purdey journey, complete with punishing training regimen (12 minutes), while stuntpeople Cyd Child and Rocky Taylor talk about the show's physicality (14 minutes) and guest star Annette Andre remembers her "thankless role" (four minutes).

Footage from 2011's *Avengers* celebration at the University of Chichester finds director Ray Austin in anecdote mode (57 minutes) and biographer Marie Cameron giving illuminating insights into Patrick Macnee (17 minutes); Clemens (three minutes), director John Hough (one minute) and composer Laurie Johnson (40 minutes) are also represented. There's also a look at the stunning restoration work (22 minutes), a silent but flirty screen test with Hunt and Lumley (two minutes), French and German credit sequences, and a promo for Rover cars (five minutes) with an unconvincing Macnee double – get yer 'air cut! The package includes a reprint of comic strips from the '70s annuals, and a booklet.

Nick Setchfield

"Don't laugh at my hair, your hat looks ridiculous."

EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY

ℹ Originally planned to have the name Charlie, Purdey specialised in a secret (and fictitious) French martial art, Panache.

HAMMER HORROR

Grave matters

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1970 | 12/15 | 4K & Blu-ray

Directors **Jimmy Sangster, Roy Ward Baker**

Cast **Ralph Bates, Kate O'Mara, Christopher Lee, Dennis Waterman**

Originally a double-bill in cinemas, these new restorations make a fitting pair of releases.

Essentially a failed reboot, **The Horror Of Frankenstein** ★★★☆☆ is a darkly comic sidestep in the studio's Frankenstein saga. Ralph Bates picks up Peter Cushing's bloodied scalpel, turning Victor into a sardonic psychopath, while future Darth Vader Dave Prowse is a barrel-chested lunk of a Creature, missing that crucial glimmer of pathos. Its grave-snatched tongue may be firmly placed in its cheek, but this is underpowered Hammer.

Scars Of Dracula ★★★½☆ is stronger, straighter stuff, save for some moments of pure French farce in the bedroom. The gory aftermath of a vampiric church massacre still has the power to startle, and there are welcome echoes of Stoker's original novel. And if Christopher Lee sometimes seems like a particularly sinister hotelier as he welcomes prey into Castle Dracula, his spectacular demise is one for the ages.

Extras Critics Clarisse Loughrey and Isaura Barbé-Brown take part in engaging, perceptive discussions about both films (34/31 minutes). And *Scars* has a new interview with Dacre Stoker (17 minutes). Esentially a potted history of his great-grand uncle's creation, it offers tantalising glimpses of some vintage volumes.

Horror ★★★★☆ has an expert-led 2017 retrospective that's refreshingly critical in places (18 minutes); *Scars* ★★★★☆ offers a similar piece of the same vintage, with unguarded contributions from star Jenny Hanley (18 minutes). Further archival extras on *Horror* include a commentary by writer/director Jimmy Sangster, a 2001 interview with star Veronica Carlson (14 minutes), and a brief 2006 chat with Dave Prowse, mainly talking money (four minutes). *Scars* has a 2006 interview with star Chris Matthews (11 minutes), and a commentary by Christopher Lee and Roy Ward Baker. Plus: galleries; trailers. These dual-format sets each come packaged with two mini-posters and a 64–page booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

As a table centrepiece, it was probably a bit out there.

STUDIOCANAL FILMS LTD/ALAMY

ℹ Dave Prowse also played the Creature in 1967 Bond spoof *Casino Royale* and 1974's *Frankenstein And The Monster From Hell*.

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DON'T OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 15 DECEMBER

1984 | 18 | Blu-ray

Directors **Edmund Purdom, Alan Birkinshaw**

Cast **Edmund Purdom, Alan Lake, Belinda Mayne, Gerry Sundquist**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In key respects** – like the holiday-themed title – *Don't Open Till Christmas* is a generic early '80s slasher. What makes it stand out is that it couldn't be more British unless it performatively zip-tagged a Union Jack to a lamppost. So you can expect boozers, punks with mohicans, and a familiar face from *The Bill*. And scenes play out in New Scotland Yard, a Soho peep show, The London Dungeon, and The Piccadilly Theatre.

The plot? In an inversion of the norm, instead of the killer dressing up as Santa, Santas are their victims. Anyone who grinds their teeth the moment they hear Shakin' Stevens's sleigh bells may cheer him on...

It's a crude, grubby affair, with plotting as threadbare as a tatty old string of tinsel. But the fact that it is to slashers what *Death Line* is to cannibal movies induces a warm patriotic glow.

Extras 88 Films bring us four interviews. Caroline Munro (34 minutes) is barely in it, but charms all the same, talking more about *Slaughter High*, by the same producers. Alan Birkinshaw (19 minutes) spills the beans on fixing the film via reshoots. Edmund Purdom's daughter (16 minutes) paints the star as a womaniser. Plus: the obligatory Kim Newman talking head (17 minutes); commentary by a pair of film scholars; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

MIKEY

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1992 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Dennis Dimster Dink**

Cast **Brian Bonsall, Josie Bissett, Lyman Ward, John Diehl**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In the wake of** the murder of toddler James Bulger, a nervous BBFC denied a certificate to this riff on *The Bad Seed*. Hopefully this release won't inspire a wave of psycho kids electrocuting grown-ups...

Tossing a hairdryer in the bath is just one way the titular brat (Brian Bonsall) expresses displeasure; you're also liable to end up drowned, beaten with a bat, or shot with an arrow.

Absurdities pile up: at one point Mikey seems to develop a stealth mode... And for much of its duration the film feels like a low-simmer psychological thriller, as Mikey's new teacher (*Hellraiser*'s Ashley Laurence) hits the microfiche. However, come the final reel it ventures into full-blown horror territory, in satisfyingly bonkers fashion.

Extras Treasured Films serve up four new bonuses. Actors Mimi Craven (Wes's ex) and Whit Hertford are interviewed (17/13 minutes). A sprint through scores of killer kid movies (25 minutes) supplies obscurities to add to your watch list. A duo from slasher site The Hysteria Lives! provide the yak track.

In *The Making Of Mikey* (87 minutes), director Dennis Dimster Dink puts his hands up re the film's absurdities; we also discover that Bonsall is now a punk musician with neck tattoos! This dates from 2020, as does 14 minutes of the director talking over the finale. Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet; six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

CRAZE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 15 DECEMBER

1974 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD

Director **Freddie Francis**

Cast **Jack Palance, Diana Dors, Julie Ege, Edith Evans**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **One of many** British horrors helmed by Freddie Francis in-between his critically acclaimed cinematography for the likes of *The Innocents* and *The Elephant Man*, this campy slice of sleaze was described by the director as "not that good", but has its guilty pleasures.

Jack Palance plays a hard-up antiques dealer who worships a goggle-eyed African idol in his cellar. After an accidental death leads to a fortuitous discovery of gold coins, he keeps on providing it with offerings...

Craze is the definition of "that escalated quickly" – it's only seven minutes before a corpse is being rolled up in a rug. The cast is impressively crammed with familiar thesps (the likes of Diana Dors and Trevor Howard). And the stupidity of Palance's character (killing a *second* customer after a visit from the fuzz is just asking for trouble) supples some chuckles. Sure, it feels like an overgrown segment of an Amicus anthology, but there are worse things to be.

Extras It's that man again: Kim Newman ably sums things up (27 minutes). A second talking head, by fellow horror maven Jonathan Rigby (from the 2016 DVD, 31 minutes) is instructive on how the movie differs from the original novel. This 88 Films release also has a solid commentary by film historians Troy Howarth and Nathaniel Thompson. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

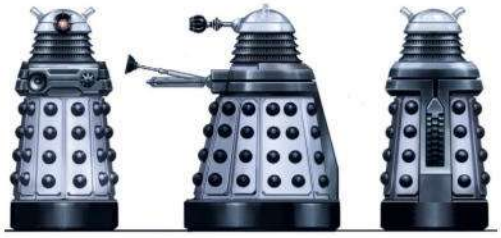
ROUND UP

Ed and Lorraine Warren bow out in **THE CONJURING: LAST RITES** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), with the paranormal investigators assisting a Pennsylvanian family who appear to have inherited a haunted mirror. We said: "Director Michael Chaves's slavish reliance on hoary jump scares and shameless *Exorcist* steals rather tests the patience." Extras-wise, you get three featurettes (totalling 23 minutes). An exploration of grief inspired by the death of his wife, David Cronenberg's **THE SHROUDS** (8 December, 4K/Blu-ray), has a startling concept: tech which allows you to watch a loved one's corpse decay. We said: "A confounding, haunting, mordantly humorous film, which may linger in the mind for days afterwards." The US Criterion Collection release had a 17-minute Cronenberg interview; The UK release just has trailers. Real-life partners Alison Brie and Dave Franco play a couple who start to fuse together after drinking water from a cave in body horror **TOGETHER** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD). We said: "*The Substance* spliced together with a romantic thriller and a touch of comedy? It might not sound like the easiest combination, but it blends effectively." Bonuses: as far as we can tell, not a sausage – not even the 11 minutes of stuff from the US release. Finally, Troma's mop-wielding mutant gets a reboot in **THE TOXIC AVENGER** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). Buy the home entertainment release and you get an "unrated" cut; this adds a scene featuring Toxie doing a radioactive piss. How delightful. Bonuses: director's commentary, three sizeable featurettes (86 minutes), and the San Diego Comic-Con panel.

Concept art of The Beast in 2006's "The Satan Pit".

The Pandorica, before, er, opening.

The Cyber King from "The Next Doctor".

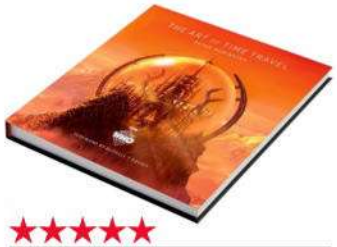


(Left) The New Paradigm Supreme Dalek. Chunky!

© PETER MCKINSTRY

THE ART OF TIME TRAVEL

Pictures Of Who



★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

324 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Peter McKinstry**

Publisher **BBC Books**

Given the piles of *Doctor Who* titles published every year, and the number of mediocre blockbusters awarded *The Art Of...* tie-ins, it's always baffled us that *Doctor Who* has never received the same treatment. So this coffee-table book is long overdue.

It showcases the creativity of concept artist Peter McKinstry. A regular on David Tennant's first two series, he also worked on *Torchwood*, and returned for Matt Smith's first season.

Not only is McKinstry hugely talented, but we don't *just* get the final, approved versions of various creatures, craft and props. There's plenty of working-out too, and some unused ideas – like a glass cane for de-ageing scientist Professor Lazarus.

McKinstry's commentary is accessible, and the inclusion of the odd email from Russell T Davies provides further insights into how the process works, and why sometimes a treatment can be beautifully executed, but inappropriate for the episode. (Davies tends to come down in favour of simplicity.)

SFX Loves ★★★★★

Portraits commissioned for books like *The Gold Archive* and *A History Of The Universe In 100 Objects* are also included, as are delightful *Eagle*-style cutaways for noughties partwork *Doctor Who: The DVD Files*. The latter (which include classic-series subjects like K-9 and the Whomobile) will be new to most fans, and deserve a better fate than rotting in landfill.

Now then, BBC Books: can we have a title like this every couple of years please? **Ian Berriman**

i McKinstry donned a Cyberman suit for "Army Of Ghosts" and "Doomsday", and hand-doubled for William Shakespeare!

SUNSET AT ZERO POINT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 9 DECEMBER

192 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Simon Stålenhag**

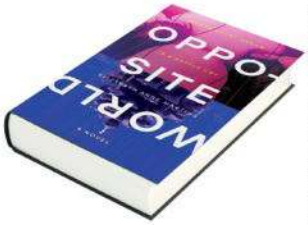
Publisher **Simon & Schuster**

This lavish illustrated novella returns us to the retro-futurist worlds of *The Electric State* author and artist Simon Stålenhag. *Sunset At Zero Point* (titled *Swedish Machines* in its Kickstarter edition) is a queer coming-of-age story set in an alternative version of the early 2000s.

Valter and Linus are teenagers living in Torsvik, a town close to the Black Fallow Exclusion Zone – the site, some decades previously, of an explosion caused by experimental technology. Valter is obsessed with exploring the anomalous zone, while Linus tags along hoping to get closer to his friend and occasional lover.

Sunset At Zero Point is a wordier affair than previous Stålenhag books, but his images remain the heart of it. While the love story is tenderly evoked, Stålenhag's prose is often a little flat, and the images, while undeniably well-drawn, are repetitive.

At its best, the combination of the two conjures moments of real magic – a scene where Valter and Linus look to some towers on the horizon, only to realise with a shock that they were demolished decades previously, is powerfully uncanny because we can see what they're experiencing. For much of the book, however, this is simply a lot of drawings of cars in featureless landscapes, with a few pangs of teenage angst. **Will Salmon**



OPPOSITE WORLD

★★★½☆

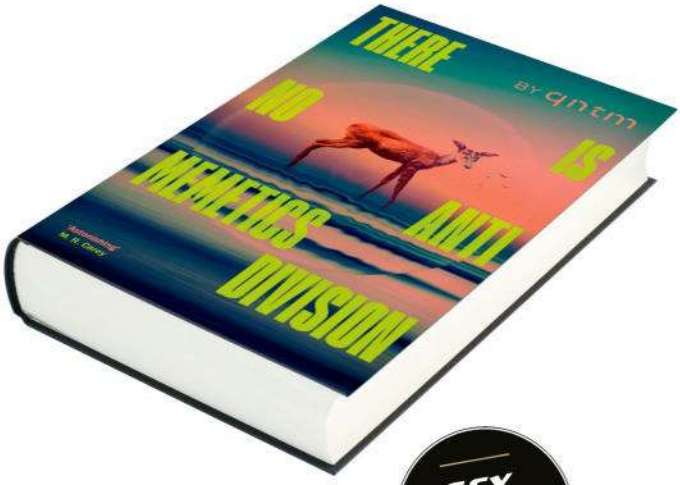
RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Elizabeth Anne Martins**
Publisher **Flame Tree Press**

It takes a while to work out where *Opposite World* is going, but the slow-build of the opening chapters proves worthwhile in the long run.

Elizabeth Anne Martins's second novel kicks off by explaining Piper "Pip" Screed's unconventional upbringing, living off-the-grid with her seemingly paranoid dad. Everything changes when a friendly (or is she?) neighbour gives her a job at a nearby tech firm, pulling her into the orbit of the Reverie Cloud, a groundbreaking new virtual space where you can explore your own subconscious.

Martins tells the story in first person, using evocative descriptions of sights, sounds and – most notably – smells to get you inside Pip's head. Few things are as they seem, however, as memories and dreamscapes prove malleable, and shady corporate types keep you guessing about their motives. As a result, Pip is less an unreliable narrator than a narrator doing her best with unreliable information.

There's an *Inception*-esque rigour to the book's dream logic, a pleasingly sci-fi-friendly framework for a story set in the weirder corners of the psyche. Unfortunately, it comes a little unstuck in an overly Hollywoodised denouement featuring amoral villains, high-stakes action and jarring fantastical elements. But at its best, this is a gripping, inventive and very human tech thriller. **Richard Edwards**



SFX Loves ★★★★★

THERE IS NO ANTIMEMETICS DIVISION

Thinking the unthinkable

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
280 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **qntm**
Publisher **Del Rey**

Starting out life online as part of the SCP Wiki collaborative fiction project, this dazzling mix of sci-fi and horror has now made the leap to a traditionally published edition, and it's easy to see why.

Reworked and remixed from its original version, but telling the same gripping story, the book focuses on the secretive Unknown Organisation, which catalogues and battles strange phenomena that threaten the everyday world.

This might sound over-familiar, but these tropes are twisted in unpredictable ways, especially by focusing on the Organisation division that deals with antimemetics. These are ideas that aggressively resist being spread, and conceptual entities that can't be easily recorded or remembered.

As the plot unfolds across years, it becomes clear the Antimemetics Division is facing something unfathomably powerful, and what starts as an imaginative thriller evolves in a genuinely disturbing and apocalyptic direction.

Compulsively readable and breathtakingly inventive, it matches immersive world-building with brilliantly written shocks. There's even a touching love story, but it's also the best distillation of pure Lovecraftian cosmic horror in years.

A symphony of escalating dread with multiple bravura sequences that are properly nightmarish in their execution, this jaw-dropping mind-bender is about as unmissable as sci-fi/fantasy novels get. **Saxon Bullock**

> **Compulsively readable and breathtakingly inventive**

i In case you're wondering, that author pen name is pronounced "quantum". His real monicker is Sam Hughes.

TO CAGE A WILD BIRD

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Brooke Fast**
Publisher **Wayward TxF**

This is being marketed as *The Hunger Games* meets *Prison Break*: a good combo, but you can also toss in every YA trope under the sun, and some porn. That's not a criticism, though. In her debut novel, Brooke Fast has successfully distilled a heap of clichés into an engrossing dystopian thriller.

Bounty hunter Raven catches criminals: it's the only way to survive in her half-starved society. But when her little brother is arrested, she deliberately breaks the law herself so that she can follow him to Endlock, the brutal prison where she's been sending her captives. It's not just a prison, though; it's an attraction – felons are hunted there for sport by rich citizens. Raven must protect her brother, help a rebellion, break out of jail... and try not to lust over hunky prison guard Vale.

It's visceral, yearning, page-turning stuff, but it's a shame that the book's biggest gimmick – the hunts – are few and far between, lacking in genuine terror and often too easy to survive. Day-to-day life in the prison is rendered well, however, while Raven and Vale's growing lust is palpable. Just one thing: can we hit pause on all the men in this genre calling their lovers "Little Bird" or "Little Dove" or variations thereof? It's getting a "little" repetitive... **Jayne Nelson**

SUPERMAN: THE ART AND MAKING OF THE FILM

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

176 pages | **Hardback/ebook**

Author **James Field**

Publisher **Abrams Books**

As his foreword reveals, star David Corenswet's first thought on reading the *Superman* screenplay was "How do you even begin to make this work?"

Here's how. This copiously illustrated volume charts the creation of what James Gunn intended to be "the most comic book movie ever", restoring the Last Son of Krypton to centre stage while launching a new and cohesive cinematic universe with all the Silver Age magic of the printed page.

Quotes from cast and crew cover everything from the influence of Edward Hopper paintings to Gunn's own rescue dog Ozu – inspiration for the mischievous Krypto, right down to the permanently cocked shaggy ear. There's lots of lovely concept art, along with treats like the schematics of the Fortress of Solitude and a chance to linger over the mural of heroes in the Hall of Justice.

Everyone's in upbeat professional mode, naturally. And it might have been nice to see some alternative designs for Superman's costume, among other paths not taken. But there's insight into the most crucial question of all: to trunks or not to trunks? Turns out the decision to go with the Man of Steel's iconic red over-undies was only made the night before filming began. **Nick Setchfield**

TALES OF OCCULT BRITAIN

These Spectred Isles

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

256 pages | **Hardback**

Editor **Maria J Pérez Cuervo**

Publisher **Hellebore**

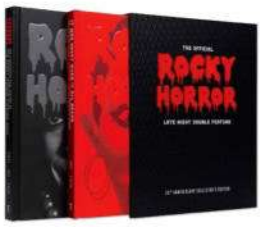
The United Kingdom is teeming with stories of fairies, witches, ghosts and other supernatural creatures, as editor Maria J Pérez Cuervo knows better than most. As the founder of small press Hellebore, she has been curating collections of British folklore since 2019. This book, though, is the first time she's edited a collection of fiction: nine new stories set in very specific, real locations across the UK. (Yes, we know the title says "Britain", but one of the stories is set in Northern Ireland, and... look, we don't have space to get into it here.)

Short story collections are often variable in quality, but maybe because the editor chose her writers carefully, or maybe because she has such a strong editorial voice herself, there's a satisfying coherence to this anthology. Each contemporary (or, contemporary-ish, with one story set in the late '80s) tale sees a citizen of the modern world knocked off-kilter, usually by grief, and drawn inescapably towards something ancient and incomprehensible.

There's a sort of dream logic that permeates the collection. Opener "Funeral At St Botolph's" by Reggie Oliver sees a struggling artist lured into painting half-glimpsed horrors, as if his paintbrush were bewitched; Helen Grant's "The Seeds Of Time" has a widower led to his doom by a shapeshifting Sleagh Maith; while Eóin Murphy's "Lake Of Sorrows" is set on a foggy mountainside where human rules no longer apply. Despite being original stories, they feel more like something half-remembered, as if maybe someone's older sister once told you these stories when you were a kid.

Though the quality is high, the standout is the final story in the collection. Ally Wilkes's "Wild Edric's Ride" doesn't just update an ancient myth; it imbues it with purpose, asking: if a folkloric hero were summoned today to protect the nation, what would he truly be fighting for? **Sarah Dobbs**

i Other writers included in the collection are Ramsey Campbell, Verity Holloway, Steve Duffy, Steve Toase and Nina Antonia.



THE OFFICIAL ROCKY HORROR LATE NIGHT DOUBLE FEATURE

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

352 pages | **Hardback**

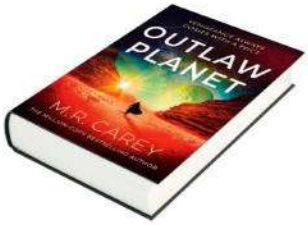
Authors **Linus O'Brien, Richard O'Brien**

Publisher **Weldon Owen**

An accompaniment to the documentary by Linus O'Brien, son of *Rocky Horror* creator Richard, this 50th Anniversary Collector's Edition comprises two volumes: *Strange Journey: The Illustrated Oral History Of Rocky Horror*, which pretty much repeats the documentary on the page; and *It Was Great When It All Began: The Original Annotated Theatrical Script*, covering the early '70s London and Los Angeles stage shows.

The script book is beautifully illustrated and fascinating for anyone who hasn't seen the stage version. If a cinema showing is more your thing, there are instructions for "virgins" who don't know the prompts for audience partici... *pation*. (Sorry, couldn't resist.)

Strange Journey, meanwhile, gives you the opportunity to examine images used fleetingly in the documentary – for instance, O'Brien's note explaining the importance of B-movies. An array of photos sit alongside transcripts from the many interviews. You could argue that if you've watched the documentary, you might not need this, but that doesn't take into account the tactile nature of this book. It's perfect to dip into, like the swimming pool so enjoyed by Frank-N-Furter and his pals. **Jayne Nelson**



OUTLAW PLANET

★★★★½

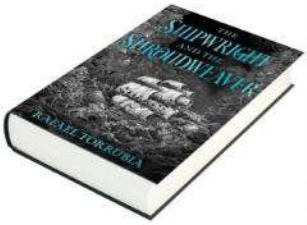
RELEASED OUT NOW!
464 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **MR Carey**
Publisher **Orbit**

With any career that endures, there comes a point where a writer is *reliable*, and in truth, some novelists plateau here. However, a few push on, and to judge by his latest novel, MR Carey is one such writer.

In great part this is because the anti-heroine in *Outlaw Planet*, which is set in the same fictional universe as Carey's Pandominium duology, is so memorable. Ex-schoolteacher and outlaw Dog-Bitch Bess, as she will be dubbed during a brutal civil war, is one of those characters who's so alive that she seems constantly to be straining to escape the page. Just as remarkably, one of her central relationships in what's often a lonely life is with a gun, the self-aware Wakeful Slim, and it's sketched out in a way that's touching and bittersweet.

This is an SF western, with a plot that riffs on the American Civil War. And yet, that's also a misleading simplification, because the frontier inhabited by Bess is a place where nothing is as it seems. Add in a split narrative involving dimension-hopping soldiers, animal-human creatures, a war conducted across the multiverse, and mysterious archaeological remains, and there's much going on here.

That it never seems too much, but rather the product of a brilliant imagination, is entirely to Carey's credit. His best novel yet. **Jonathan Wright**



THE SHIPWRIGHT AND THE SHROUDWEAVER

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
784 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Rafael Torrubia**
Publisher **Gollancz**

There's no faulting the scale or ambition of Rafael Torrubia's debut, set in a world where people have been stripped of their names, leaving them with only their job titles. The heart of the story is the conflict between father and daughter. Crowkisser is on a crusade to purge the world of gods. Her father, Shroudweaver, and his partner, Shipwright, plan to stop Crowkisser by racing her to the northern stronghold of Thell, site of a terrible battle. There, Shroudweaver will harness the souls of the dead to forge a new god to counter Crowkisser's magic, but the conqueror has schemes of her own.

Torrubia crafts a big world, but his prose is excessively florid and gets bogged down in the details. His characters indulge in long internal monologues and ruminations that do nothing to advance the plot, dialogue is stilted and obtuse, and the text is weighed down with laboured metaphors – a rough patch of sea, we're told, "could sink a ship like a sucked thumb".

Consequently, the story never develops any forward momentum, even during the action scenes, where Torrubia insists on describing every ebb and flow of the conflict. The result is a novel that's overlong and overwritten. **David West**

THE WOLF AND HIS KING

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
339 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Finn Longman**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Fantasy novels inspired by classic myths and medieval tales are nothing new, but this one, a queer retelling of the 12th century French tale of *Bisclavret*, written down by Marie de France, manages to feel fresh and modern.

Bisclavret is a garwolf, a man who changes unpredictably into a wolf at night, with no control over the changes or his actions. When the old king dies and the prince is crowned, his cousin urges him to rejoin court life, reclaim the lands lost to his father, and live again.

Bisclavret is terrified of revealing himself, but drawn by childhood dreams of knighthood and belonging. Meanwhile, the young king, recently returned from exile, is fascinated by this new knight, unable to resist every opportunity to be with him.

It's a beautiful, lyrical tale of love, betrayal and above all, yearning. Strikingly, no one is named except Bisclavret – we have a cousin, a king, a ward, a knight in green – and yet this never feels forced or unreal, but adds to the mythological, folk tale feel.

This is a queer romance that refreshingly combines an acceptance of sexuality with the needs of nobles in a medieval time to marry and have children, while speaking to universal human desires for love, friendship and safety. **Rhian Drinkwater**

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks this time is Ian McDonald's **THE WILDING** (★★★★☆, out now, Gollancz). It follows a group of Irish teenagers and teachers camping in a former commercial peat bog that's recently been rewilded. They find themselves in a struggle for survival as they're attacked by something ancient and predatory... We said: "Melds the urban and rural to take folk horror somewhere unexpected, spooky and, rather paradoxically, new". Set in 1970, Grady Hendrix's **WITCHCRAFT FOR WAYWARD GIRLS** (★★★★☆, 1 January, Tor Nightfire) centres on a home in Florida, where unwed teenage mothers are hidden by their families to have their babies in secret. There, 15-year-old Fern meets a strange librarian who's very keen for the girls to read a book about witchcraft... We said: "Hendrix employs a more empathetic tone than usual... This exploration of the impact of power and control on young women's bodies also reflects the horror all around us in 2025." Finally, Lorraine Wilson's **WE ARE ALL GHOSTS IN THE FOREST** (★★★★☆, out now, Solaris) is set in a post-apocalyptic world haunted by the digital ghosts of a collapsed internet. It follows a village herbalist who sets out to find the truth behind a mysterious digital plague. We said: "Wilson conjures an eerie and original setting.... The heady atmosphere is enhanced by the book's leisurely pace and evocative descriptions of a changed world."

Reviews

EDGE OF OBLIVION

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

248 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Kirk Weddell**

Publisher **Troubadour Publishing**

Logic dictates that the universe should contain loads of planets capable of supporting life, so why have no aliens dropped by to say hello? That's the basic gist of Fermi's Paradox, the real-life scientific conundrum that provides an intriguing throughline for this gripping near-future thriller.

Recently bereaved computer scientist Mitch Daniels is stationed on the Sentinel defence platform as a chaperone for Amie, the state-of-the-art quantum computer he created. But when he starts to experience vivid premonitions of the Earth's annihilation – is it war, aliens or something else entirely? – he must work out if he can trust his superiors back home, while convincing them he's in a fit state to continue his mission.

Author Kirk Weddell (who adapted the book from his own unmade screenplay) crams a lot of ideas into a tight 248 pages, shifting the narrative between Mitch's present-day predicament and flashbacks to his late wife, an expert in extraterrestrial life. But while *Edge Of Oblivion* belongs in the same "lonely guy in space" subgenre as James Smythe's *The Explorer* and Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* – and the book's paranoia over AI is *so* 2025 – this is very much its own beast. The story frequently spins off in satisfyingly unexpected directions and, best of all, wraps up with a clever, thought-provoking ending. **Richard Edwards**

IN HIS DAY

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

248 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **John Francis O'Neill**

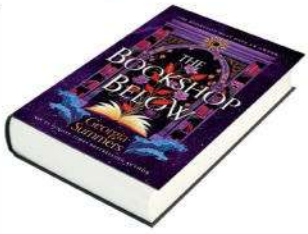
Publisher **Killrithmere Publishing**

More nostalgia porn than an actual novel, *In His Day* feels like *Life On Mars* without all that cop-show shtick.

The plot is minimal, the fantasy element even more so. When suicidal fiftysomething documentary maker Shay O'Rourke pays a final visit to the estates in London where he grew up in poverty, he finds himself back in the '70s, and immediately bumps into his younger self. Now trapped in the past (for reasons that are never actually explained) he decides he needs to change the course of young Shay's miserable life for the better. But before he can do that, he needs to work out how to survive in the '70s, with no job. And no identity.

After a clunky, description-heavy first few pages, the narrative settles into a charming, wistful groove. Despite his situation young Shay is a genuinely loveable character, and the pages are packed with well-observed details of life in '70s London – from the sweets to the programmes on TV; from the ever-present dog shit to the layout of WHSmith; from Green Shield stamps to the football pools.

But there's little in the way of drama or real conflict. The ending's also a tad Hallmark Channel-y. For a book that describes so much poverty and hardship, it all feels surprisingly cosy – even when a bent copper does eventually make a cameo. **Dave Golder**



THE BOOKSHOP BELOW

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

371 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Georgia Summers**

Publisher **Hodderscape**

There's an understanding readers have, that books are something magical, and that a life surrounded by them would in many ways be the best kind of life. It's a philosophy shared by the protagonists of this fantasy – though in their case, the books really are enchanting.

Cassandra grew up in Chiron's shop, one of several "tributary bookshops" that deal in magical books. She was his protégé, expected to take over the shop, until she broke one rule too many and was kicked out. Since then she's survived by stealing books and conducting unauthorised "readings", channelling the power of the books – but now Chiron has died and left her the shop.

Plunged back into the legitimate side of things, Cassandra must try to hide her past while restoring the shop and dealing with haughty-yet-handsome Lowell Sharpe, a bookseller who feels he should have acquired the bookshop.

There are some fabulous concepts here – the magical underground river that imbues the books with their power; the role of ink in "readings". People's flaws are well explored, with a chilling antagonist who becomes more powerful as the plot progresses. The mysteries of the river unravel towards the end, however, with a drawn-out climax that loses the world's feelings of reality and consequence. **Rhian Drinkwater**

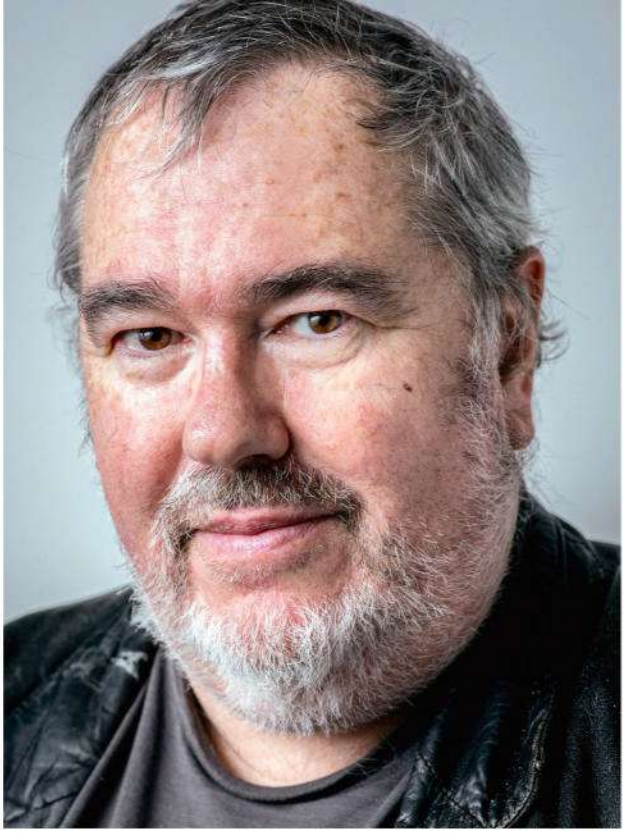
ALSO OUT

There're lots more books we couldn't squeeze in. Brandon Sanderson's new collection **TAILORED REALITIES** (9 December, Gollancz) includes nine tales. The centrepiece is *Moment Zero*, a "very long novella" in which two detectives investigate a missing person case involving time travel and alternate realities. Set after *Revenge Of The Sith*, Adam Christopher's **STAR WARS: MASTER OF EVIL** (out now, Del Rey) follows Darth Vader as he embarks on a quest to conquer death itself. Meanwhile, Gavin G Smith's **ALIEN: CULT** (out now, Titan) sees an FBI agent and his synth partner tangling with a xenomorph-worshipping religion as they investigate a serial killer. Former *Blue Peter* editor-in-chief Richard Marson is the author of **BOX OF DELIGHTS** (out now, Ten Acre), a history of BBC children's programmes between 1967 and 1997 which draws on over 170 new interviews. *Rentaghost* and *The Chronicles Of Narnia* are among the shows covered. If you've been good you might find **DOCTOR WHO CHRISTMAS SPECIALS: TWENTY YEARS OF FESTIVE ADVENTURES** (TBC, Candy Jar) in your stocking. It speaks to four directors of said festive episodes, as part of an exploration of "why they mean so much to fans". Bah, humbug etc. Finally, if you want a big-brain perspective on the Glen A Larson show, **BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: A COMPANION TO THE ORIGINAL SERIES** (out now, White Owl) should deliver – author Lee Fratantuono is an adjunct professor of Ancient Classics, no less! Expect synopses, character analysis, and exploration of its influences.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Ian McDonald

He may have won multiple awards, but his tractor knowledge is questionable



© LAWRIE PHOTOGRAPHY

What is your daily writing routine like?

It took me a long time to learn when not to write, because it's just stuff I'll rip out the next day. So I work until what I call *Homes Under The Hammer* time, and then start up again around 4:00pm.

Describe the room in which you typically write.

Stupidly, it's the coldest room in the house, but it overlooks my garden and I can see the planes coming in to Belfast City Airport, which gives me immense pleasure. Desk, book cases, the feckin' printer...

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk/within reach?

A *Thunderbirds* set (£5 from an Oxfam shop), a battle-panda from teaching in China, and a little glass bauble with the Moon laser-etched in it. Plus tarot decks.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music?

Every book has its own soundtrack, though it can take a while to settle on it. *The Wilding* had 13 hours of rural dark ambience. My next book, *Once Upon A Time On The Moon*, (due out in 2027) had mid-2000s Ibiza trance.

MICHAEL S WIRTZ/PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/MCT/SIPA USA/ALAMY

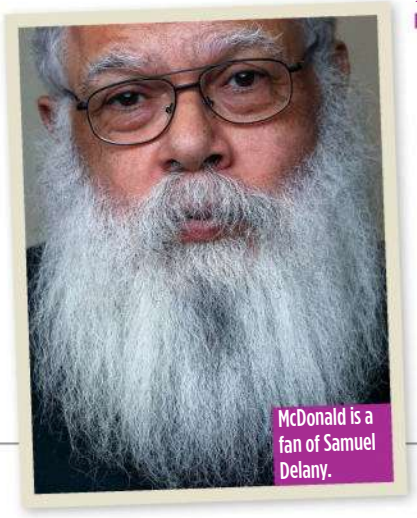
Which of your books are you the most proud of?

I'm proud of all of them (except *Out On Blue Six*), but the most personal, the most heartfelt, the one I put everything into, was *Hopeland*. It's a book with everything. It's a love story of the early Anthropocene. I almost subtitled it *The Marriage Of Space And Time*. Plus: Tesla coils!

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

Yes, and I've forgotten all of them.

> **"It took me a long time to learn when not to write"**



McDonald is a fan of Samuel Delany.

What would be your desert island book?

A book I can come back to and get something new from every time is John Crowley's *Little, Big*. It's about how the further you go into wonder, the bigger things get.

Recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known.

Perhaps not "not well known", but under-read? I have re-read Samuel R Delany's *Stars In My Pocket Like Grains Of Sand* every year for the past seven years. Nothing happens, everything happens. It has a wonderful sense that you're seeing one tiny part of a very large universe, yet its all.

What's the best or strangest feedback you've ever received from a reader?

Back in 1990, I wrote a fantasy novel, *King Of Morning, Queen Of Day*. I got an airmail letter from an Englishman living in Crete, which said, "Enjoyed the book very much. However, I must pick you up on the Massey Ferguson tractor on page (whatever). That model was not available until (whenever)..." At least he didn't say "and it threw me out of the novel so badly that I chucked it against the wall."

'Unexpected, spooky and paradoxically new' SFX
'Ian McDonald has never written a bad novel' Cory Doctorow
THE WILDING
IAN McDONALD
'Brilliant stuff' Daily Mail
'Vividly written' The Guardian

What would you say is the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

That we're all super-rich Dan Browns.

And what is the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

That I'm not super-rich Dan Brown.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

Finish something!

The Wilding is out in paperback now, published by Gollancz.

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Edge Of Oblivion

by Kirk Weddell

From an Academy-honoured screenwriter comes a mind-bending thriller – a bold vision of quantum AI and time travel, and a meditation on Fermi's Paradox

He built an AI to change the world. Now they have just 24 hours to save it.

After the initial jolt, it felt like falling.

Mitch closed his eyes to block out the sweat oozing from his furrowed brow as he fell.

And fell.

The only sound in the cramped space was his own breathing. He held his breath and heard his heart beating – felt it beating against his eardrums. Fast. So he started breathing again.

And opened his eyes.

A thin frost rimmed the window in front of him, collecting at the edges of the inner pane. The oval stretched from just an inch or so above his head to halfway between his sternum and belly button. They'd installed a window so he wouldn't go crazy, so he could see that, though he was in a graphene coffin, he hadn't been buried. Instead, he was falling away from the station on a re-entry trajectory; all he had to do was avoid burning up, or skipping back out of the atmosphere, and deploy a parachute that had been folded up for... how long? He tried to force the thought from his mind.

But someone would have replaced it if it had passed its shelf life.

Wouldn't they?

They'd have sent up a replacement chute for him.

If they thought he would ever have to use it, or if there really was any chance he'd make it back to Earth alive. The graphene coffin was officially called an EEP, an emergency escape pod. Only to be used as a last resort. That gave some clue as to his chances of surviving the fall back to Earth.

Outside, the stars mingled with spots of frost and dust caught on the window, and the little bits of things that whirled around him inside the EEP. Light from behind him washed out some of the starfield – the dayside of Earth beneath him, with its resplendent deep-blue seascapes, ochre landmasses, and precious, rare, life-giving atmosphere – still two hundred miles below, but coming up fast.

A jolt – his stomach and other internal organs moved a little, and some of the specks in the window pulled fast to one side.

Flat spin.

A flat spin was bad. It shouldn't be happening. The thruster quads of the EEP's reaction control system weren't good for much – had only been designed for one thing, and that was to keep him level, with his back, where the heatshield was, facing the atmosphere.

The Earth rose in the window and Mitch saw his exhausted, clean-shaven reflection. He almost screamed. He wanted to – probably should have. He was facing an expanse of blue – one of the oceans. It didn't matter which. If he went in face down, he would burn up. Water or dirt, no part of him would hit it.

The Earth spun away and the scattering of stars was back and the dust whirled around faster.

Sunlight touched the edge of the station Mitch had just abandoned.

A crackle on the intercom –

"Mitch, what is your status? We detect a fire in the Sentinel. Are you okay?" It was Captain Dane, though her voice was all but lost in a general roar he'd thought was inside his head, but now he realised was most likely the EEP vibrating around him. It sounded like it was shaking itself apart, giving him no comfort that he wasn't being shaken apart with it.

"I couldn't stop it," he said. His voice quivered in the vibrating escape pod. "I'm sorry."

His breath sent a gentle smudge of fog across the window, obscuring the brilliant blue and white of the Earth as it spun back into view.

This wasn't a flat spin; he was all over the place.

Completely out of control.

"What's happening?" Captain Dane demanded over the intercom. "Mitch –"

Her voice cut out as the Earth slipped from his view – before he registered grey taking the place of white, of a streak of... was that orange light?

Then the station again – the Sentinel – and sparkling reflections that might be debris or bits of ice. Crystallised gases leaking from the station? An orange fireball moved in a way that was only natural if there was no gravity acting on it, no air to feed it. It danced with whatever flooded out of the Sentinel.

The structure came apart all at once, and Mitch realised his mouth was open – the side of his face, his temples, hurt.

Was he screaming? Tears

The Author

Kirk Weddell is a British science fiction screenwriter, filmmaker and novelist whose work in screenwriting has been honoured by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. With a degree in neuroscience, his stories blend deep psychological insight with vivid cinematic storytelling. Passionate about all things sci-fi, he crafts character-driven narratives that explore identity, consciousness, and humanity's place in the cosmos. "A Carl Sagan quote is the key thematic anchor of *Edge of Oblivion*," he explains. "'Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception.'"

streamed down his face.

The burning station whipped out of the window and the Earth was beneath him, in front of him, both upside down and right-side up at the same time, and it was smoking. Tendrils of grey trailed off, spun out, then evaporated into the dead blackness of space as glowing chasms lacerated the ground, orange-hot and spreading fast.

Then the burning station again and stars behind it. The fire was almost out, and pieces of it glimmered as they caught the sun and the reflected light from Earth.

The spinning worsened. Mitch wasn't sure he was breathing, or if he could breathe.

Earth loomed up at him again – darker, broken, and too close. He couldn't be falling that fast. It was coming up at him – or a piece of it was.

He didn't want to believe that some of the pieces coming off it were buildings, people, bridges – whole cities. Mountains blew past, then whole forests, first on fire then hard-freezing as they hit the atmosphere.

His wife Kathryn's words reverberated in his head. "Enrico Fermi once asked: Why, with so many potentially habitable planets in the Universe, are we still alone?"

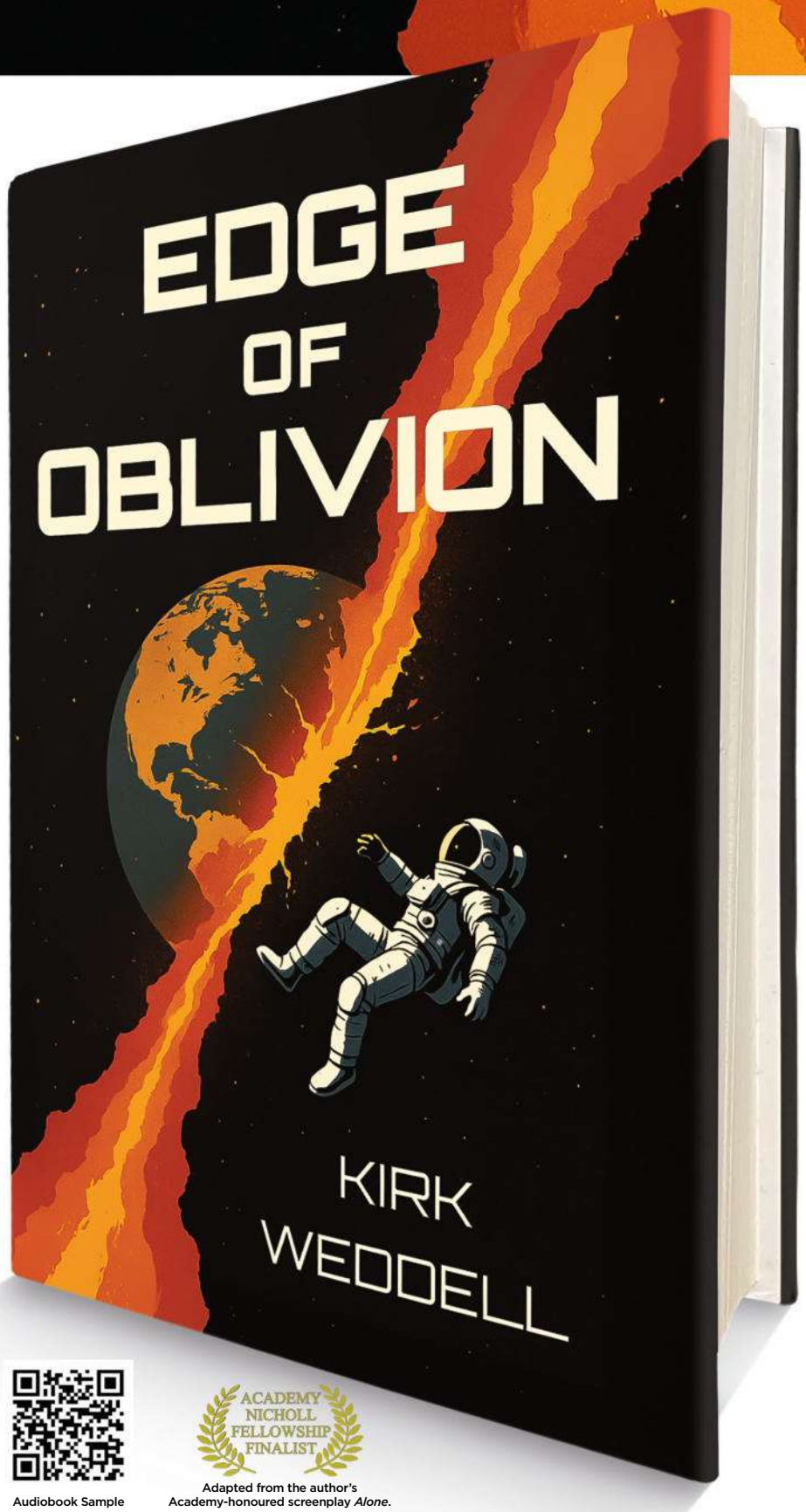
Another jolt as something hit the pod and set him spinning in another direction, then something else hit him, then something came right at the window – a chunk of ground full of the twisting, freezing forms of trees being ripped apart by centrifugal force and their own weakness in the face of a hard vacuum.

He was falling onto it and it was being thrown at him, and Mitch knew he wasn't going to land. Plummeting at 17,000 miles per hour – falling toward a planet tearing itself to pieces, turning inside out, burning orange then yellow then blinding white, and finally that too broke apart and cooled so fast that shards of rock shot past him like arrows the size of mountains.

He hoped something would finally hit him and it would be over before he had to witness the last breath of the Earth and process the stark realisation that the answer to Fermi's Paradox was unravelling before him. Could the reason we have never encountered other intelligent life be that they too befell the same fate?

Mitch closed his eyes to shut out the hellish spectacle as a high-pitched shrill sound increased in volume – and became a tone.

Edge Of Oblivion is available to buy now, published by Troubador. www.edgeofoblivion.ai



Audiobook Sample

ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIP FINALIST

Adapted from the author's Academy-honoured screenplay *Alone*.

BATMAN

SFX Loves

Fractional change

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **DC Comics**

Writer **Matt Fraction**

Artist **Jorge Jiménez**

ISSUES 1-3 **Certain comic-book** writers are always worth paying attention to, and Matt Fraction has been a resident on that list for the last 20 years. In that time he's done extensive work for Marvel (including his legendary run on *Hawkeye* with artist David Aja) and some wild independent comics (like *Sex Criminals* and *Casanova*). Now DC have handed him the keys to the Bat-kingdom with the newly relaunched main *Batman* ongoing title.

He's picking up the situation left by Chip Zdarsky's recently concluded run, where Gotham is a newly dangerous place for Batman thanks to an aggressively anti-vigilante police force led by the corrupt and immortal Vandal Savage. With Alfred dead and Jim Gordon demoted to a beat cop, Batman's fight against crime is harder than ever, but while there's plenty of action and plot twists, these first three issues deliberately avoid the grim-and-gritty clichés which Batman comics can sometimes fall into.

Instead, Fraction goes for a brighter, poppier tone, and his Gotham is a vibrant, Tokyo-inspired city with a distinct visual style. With Batman back in his old-school blue and grey colours, this is a superhero story first and foremost, where the emphasis is on fast-paced adventure. That isn't to say there's a lack of characterisation or depth here; it's just executed in a smooth and unobtrusive way, moving the plot forward without ever letting things get too angsty or introspective. Even the potentially thorny GCPD-related plot thread (which directly tackles police violence in issue two, with both Batman and Robin ending up shot by overreacting cops) doesn't become too didactic, instead letting the subtext speak for itself.

The relaunch is also sensibly structured as a good jumping-on point for new readers. While there's some continuity to catch up on, it's very easy to grasp the important details, and each issue also has a self-contained story that's genuinely satisfying, alongside the slowly building long-term plot threads.

From Batman having an oddly touching showdown with Killer Croc, to the risks of giving Tim Drake's Robin driving lessons, Fraction gives each issue its own mood and character, while also throwing in plenty of crackling dialogue and well-played humour.

Blue and grey are totally *in* this season – very retro!

> **"The relaunch is structured as a good jumping-on point for new readers"**

This invention and creativity is also clear in the visuals, with long-time Batman artist Jorge Jiménez finding fresh approaches to both the main character and Gotham. Each page is packed with energy and dynamic framing, while the action sequences are brilliantly kinetic and there are dazzling uses of colour, alongside some slick graphic design (including fun "data entries" on each new Bat-gadget).

These first three issues fully demonstrate how well-matched the Fraction/Jiménez creative team is, delivering well-crafted superhero adventure, and giving this new era for the Dark Knight an unashamedly entertaining start. **Saxon Bullock**

i Fraction is also a TV writer, and co-created the Apple TV *Godzilla* spin-off series *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*.

ESCAPE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Image Comics**

Writer **Rick Remender**

Artist **Daniel Acuña**

ISSUES 1-3 **Throwing** unexpected genres together with anthropomorphic animals is a narrative trick that's perfect for comics, whether it be the traumatic autobiography of *Maus*, or the noir-thriller stylings of *Blacksad*.

The latest example comes via *Escape*, a new ongoing title from Image Comics. It's the story of a brutal war against a fascist empire, and Milton Shaw, a battle-hardened bomber pilot who ends up stranded behind enemy lines in a city he just helped to bomb.

Now he's got 24 hours to finish a mission that could end the war, but these first three issues also make it clear that this isn't going to be a simple "struggle for survival" tale. Instead, Rick Remender's script takes a firm look at the horrors and moral compromises of war, while also delivering an efficient mix of characterisation and tense action.

He's aided massively in this by Daniel Acuña's incredible artwork, which melds cartoony expressionism and emotional impact with a surprising layer of gritty realism. The fully painted visuals give the series a stylish, cinematic mood, and every page showcases imaginative panel layouts, alongside some jaw-dropping uses of colour.

The end result may not reach the heights of a classic like *Blacksad*, but *Escape* is still a bold and compelling talking-animals tale that's well worth your attention. **Saxon Bullock**

DEATH OF THE SILVER SURFER

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Greg Pak**
- Artist **Sumit Kumar**

ISSUES 1-5 **After Julia Garner** in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, Marvel now also has a new female Silver Surfer – not Shalla-Bal, but Major Kelly Koh. Working for BAN, the Bureau of Alien Neutralization, hunting down extraterrestrials, she initially isn't a sympathetic protagonist, but eventually sees the error of her ways.

With the main villain, BAN director Dennis Harmon, insisting that aliens like Norrin Radd shouldn't be humanised by being gendered, but instead referred to as "it", Greg Pak's script draws unsubtle parallels with current social issues.

It's impressively illustrated by Sumit Kumar, whose art blends atmospheric detail with sinewy figurework; #2 features eerie opening scenes of a raiding party looting Galactus's corpse in space, stealing his blood, which Harmon weaponises, turning it into a malevolent dark energy that inevitably threatens the Earth.

Silver Surfer is a perennial supporting character who has only irregularly commanded their own title, and here both versions seldom stand alone as Pak throws in a plethora of guest stars. In the end, Norrin is almost despatched too quickly – falling victim to a rift in space and time that's straight out of *Doctor Who*. Maybe Kelly will eventually settle into the role; if not, it surely won't be very long until Norrin soars the spaceways again. **Stephen Jewell**

Electron stages a coup against Xandra. No, us neither.

IMPERIAL

Space Is The Place

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Jonathan Hickman**
- Artists **Federico Vicentini, Iban Coello**

ISSUES 1-4 **Jonathan Hickman is** continuing his quest as Marvel's all-purpose ideas man, and this new event miniseries has him directly taking on the space opera-influenced side of the Marvel universe for the first time since his 2013 crossover saga *Infinity*.

This four-issue tale up-ends the status quo of the "cosmic" ongoing titles like *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Nova*, as a series of assassinations shatter the balance of power between competing interstellar factions. All clues point to the Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda being responsible – and while a violent conflict breaks out, a small band of heroes (including Star-Lord, Nova and Shuri) try to unravel the truth.

Hickman's comics are always packed with invention and super-smart, but he's often best when he's got enough room to mix his hyper-detailed approach with emotional impact. Here, four double-sized issues just aren't enough to make us actually care about what's happening. Instead, *Imperial* falls prey to the classic event comic problem of Too Much Damn Stuff.

There are epic space battles and sudden betrayals, but anyone who doesn't already have a working knowledge of Kree/Skrull/Shi'ar politics is going to be baffled in record time. The story's over-complicated intrigue builds up to a slightly underwhelming climax, and while the art from Federico Vicentini and Iban Coello is slick and colourful, it only manages a few properly memorable sequences.

Ultimately, while there are some exciting moments here, *Imperial* ends up feeling a bit too much like narrative busywork, and not enough like a genuinely compelling and satisfying story. **Saxon Bullock**

i Hickman is also the co-writer of *Longshots*, a tie-in with *X-Men* crossover *Age Of Revelation* that's about to hit its final issue.

THE MORTAL THOR

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Al Ewing**
- Artist **Pasqual Ferry**

ISSUES 1-3 **When is a relaunch** not really a relaunch? This new take on Marvel's legendary hero features a fresh title, a new number one, and *technically* a new character – but it's also the second chapter of writer Al Ewing's ongoing epic reinterpretation of the God of Thunder.

Following on from Ewing's acclaimed first volume, *The Immortal Thor*, this new run throws us in at the deep end: Thor is not only dead, but has been erased from history, and Earth is sealed off from the other Nine Realms. However, in New York, a familiar-looking blonde man called Sigurd Jarlson has woken up with no memories, and while he's an ordinary human with no special powers, he's *very* good with a hammer...

These first three issues follow Jarlson as myth and reality start to gradually knit back together, and feature kinetic, street-level fight sequences that wouldn't be out of place in *Daredevil*.

Ewing is playing the long game here, building up the mystery, but also focusing on who Thor is behind the mythology and superpowers. He's aided in this by Pasqual Ferry's flowing, characterful artwork, which gives each page a distinctive, energetic style.

Engaging and intriguing in equal measure, this is a fun new phase in one of the more ambitious sagas in current superhero storytelling. **Saxon Bullock**

DISPATCH

Hero sum game

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Reviewed on **PC**
- Also available on **PS5**
- Publisher **AdHoc Studio**

VIDEOGAME **Usually, when a game** casts you as a superhero, you aren't asked to spend a lot of your time sat at a desk sending *other* superheroes on missions. You'll be punching keys more often than bad guys here, though; but, in a plot twist that the set-up would never have you guessing, this is one of the best games of the year.

LA's premier hero Mecha Man, forced out of action when a fight ends with his suit getting wrecked, is recruited by the local superhero dispatch centre. There, he acts as mentor to a team of reformed(ish) supervillains, doing his best to earn their respect and keep them on the path to redemption when not sending them out to be heroic somewhere.

This is in part an interactive (and NSFW, despite profanity-and-nudity-censoring options) show – you'll sometimes be watching and listening to *Dispatch* rather than playing it. The writing is strong enough to support this, with sharp (and regularly very funny) dialogue and some memorable characters. The acting, too, is consistently great. Aaron Paul and Jeffrey Wright are the big names, but everybody else – from voiceover veterans like Laura Bailey and Erin Yvette to curveball castings such as rapper Thot Squad – put in equally strong performances that keep the atmosphere humming.

Dispatch is split into eight episodes, averaging out at less than an hour each. This brisk pace infuses the story with an energy that never drops, even during the quieter moments. It also means that emotional beats tend to fall flat, as they never feel earned. There are also two characters that fall for Mecha Man rather too quickly; perhaps it's because he sounds like Aaron Paul.

While there's a recurring hacking minigame that reminds you why people hate hacking minigames, the dispatching sections are great fun. Matching heroes to emergencies while juggling cool-downs and priorities is an absorbing challenge, played to a background of deliciously bad-natured banter. During animated sequences, meanwhile, there are regular decisions to make. Most are largely inconsequential, but some have a clear impact, teasing you back for a second playthrough – and this world, which feels alive, is one you'll be happy to save again. **Luke Kemp**

ℹ Mecha Man's employee ID is "5318008" – a number that may be familiar if you've ever turned a calculator upside down...

Not everyone got the memo about dress-down Friday.
I can handle these criminals.
How long until my mech is repaired?
What's the Phoenix Program?

THE SHOUT

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Running time **30 minutes**
- Format **Vinyl/CD**
- Label **Buried Treasure**

SOUNDTRACK **Anyone who's** seen *The Shout* may experience a twinge of anxiety before dropping the needle here.

Jerzy Skolimowski's brilliant, enigmatic 1978 film centres on the charismatic Crossley (Alan Bates), who claims to have learned a deadly "terror shout" living among aborigines. After he inveigles his way into the home of avant-garde composer Anthony Fielding (John Hurt), we see this is no hollow boast...

The lion's share of the score is electronics by Rupert Hine – later to produce albums such as Howard Jones's Human's Lib. (A couple of themes by Genesis' Mike Rutherford and Tony Banks are absent.) Utilising synths like the EMS VCS 3 and the Yamaha CS-80, the 32 tracks intersperse music cues and other sounds used in the film (like Fielding's experiments with turning foley – marbles on a tin tray, wasp buzz – into musique concrète) with demos and out-takes.

Expect ominous undertones, loops and drones. Several cues would qualify as "dark ambient" nowadays. A couple manipulate church organ in magisterial style. Others skew closer to Brian Eno. Side A's track six is the one to blast if you want to try and make birds drop from the sky – just expect to be the topic of animated discussion on the street WhatsApp group...

The transparent turquoise vinyl comes with a postcard, 2" badge and A2 movie poster; CD buyers get the postcard and a booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DOCTOR WHO: DARE YOU

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **60 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **For all *Doctor Who*'s** sci-fi trappings, the show is often at its best when leaning into fairy-tale horror. In this latest addition to Big Finish's range featuring the Ninth Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) and Rose (Billie Piper), the TARDIS returns to the Powell Estate. The Doctor is keen to investigate a temporal anomaly near the butcher's, only to discover that the locals are being haunted by a voice that compels them to act on their intrusive thoughts.

This is the third Ninth Doctor adventure in a row set on the estate where Rose grew up, and while the first half of *Dare You* is enjoyably creepy, there is a sense that Big Finish is relying too much on the location. Happily, events takes a mid-episode swerve, opening the story up to become grander in scope as it asks: what if the Doctor gave in to his own darkest impulses?

As ever, the core cast is terrific, with Piper continuing to be the standout. Lisa McMullin's script is also worthy of praise, with its fine eye for the nuances of these characters – when Jackie Tyler (Camille Coduri) is "dared" to destroy a supermarket display, she worries that she'll be barred *again*! Another winning Ninth Doctor tale, then, but Big Finish needs to step away from the estate for a while. Go on, dare you. **Will Salmon**

WARHAMMER QUEST: DARKWATER

SFX Loves

★★★★★

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Players **Two-four players**
- Publisher **Games Workshop**

BOARDGAME **This year marks** the 30th anniversary of *Warhammer Quest*, Games Workshop's co-operative dungeon crawler. *Darkwater* is the sixth edition, and marks another evolution for a game that shakes up its format every few years.

The most recent iterations, *Blackstone Fortress* and *Cursed City*, were extremely good fun, but also took an age to set up, with the tile-based board a particular faff. In some ways *Darkwater* plays quite similarly – once again you're leading a party of adventurers into a perilous lair to fight monsters and find treasure – but the process has been streamlined. Rather than moving tiles between rounds, the board is presented as a large-format hardback book that contains 18 different playable maps. It's an ingenious solution and one that helps to make the game faster.

As ever, the box is stuffed with miniatures. The seven heroes have a more traditional fantasy flavour than the goth-tinged *Cursed City* – a knight, a wizard, a dwarf, and so on. But it's the folk horror-inspired monsters that really shine: gorgeous (by which we mean beautifully horrible) character models like Belga the Cystwitch, plus hordes of Pestigor and Pox-Wretches to slay. A wonderful game, one for the Christmas list of wannabe adventurers. **Will Salmon**

DEMONSCHOOL

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Format **PC**
- Also on **Nintendo Switch, PS 4/5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S**
- Publisher **Ysbryd Games**

VIDEOGAME **When an isolated** university starts summoning demons, it's up to the students to foil its apocalyptic plot. Thankfully, heroine Faye has been studying up on demon slaying, and she's keen to put what she's learnt into practice.

It's a stylish affair. Gorgeous 2D pixel art is cleverly punctuated by 3D demonic influences, from gross tentacles to fighty floating eyeballs overshadowing the students. Character writing is light-touch but charming enough to make each of Faye's friends stand out, while a funky soundtrack accompanies you through many, many grid-based fights.

Faye's pals are squishy young adults, so you've got to play tactically. Loveable meathead Destin can punch demons so hard he deals damage to any unholy comrade unfortunate enough to be standing directly behind – so it makes sense to pair him with shy shutterbug Namako, who can shift enemies around the board while also stunning them. Recruiting more of these weirdos is what keeps the interdimensional battlefield interesting.

However, constant combat can make fights feel like homework. Boss battles shake things up with striking presentation and puzzle elements, but these gimmicks can take more than a few retries to work out. Ultimately, Faye and friends make it worth staying the course, though. **Jess Kinghorn**

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

★½☆☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Format **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series X/S**
- Publisher **Paradox Interactive**

VIDEOGAME **Awakening from** an extended nap, elder vampire Phyre finds themselves in modern, snowbound Seattle. Capable of turning foes into bloody smears upon the snow, they waste no time in painting the town red. But flurries of clunky, supernatural violence grow tiresome alongside an equally shallow plot – it's enough to make you want to crawl right back into the coffin.

Each flavour of vampire "clan" comes with their own mix of powers, from the Banu Haqim's immensely satisfying barehanded decapitation ability, to the Toreador's kiss turning enemies to fight for you. But sadly there's little opportunity to tackle constant scuffles differently.

Detours away from combat feel even worse. The narrative lacks anything in the way of real bite, frequently pausing for lengthy flashbacks that unfold like a bargain-bin detective noir. Even worse, while Seattle's bloodthirsty elite have designs on leveraging Phyre into their schemes, undercooked villains only leave a gummy impression.

No matter how you choose to deal with Seattle's night-time drama, you inevitably end up in the same place; the illusion of choice is unfortunate evidence of a difficult development for this long-awaited sequel to an RPG classic. It's enough to make one cry bloody tears. **Jess Kinghorn**

JANUARY 1966

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

West and Ward quickly became an iconic TV duo.

FLASHBACK

Holy Primetime!

12 JANUARY 1966 When execs at ABC first offered him a ticket to Gotham City, producer William Dozier had no inkling of the cultural sensation he was about to unleash. "I really thought they were crazy if they were going to try to put this on television," he admitted, years later.

The network was keen to snag a younger demographic, and a live-action *Batman* seemed the perfect vehicle. Not only would it offer the colour, energy and outsized characters of the comic books, but in the pop art age of Warhol and Lichtenstein, it promised to be *hip*, too.

Inspired by reports of riotous screenings at the Playboy Mansion, 1943's original *Batman* serial had recently played in revival cinemas across America. '60s sophisticates howled at the saggy tights and earnest cliff-hanging heroics.

Dozier decided to weaponise that inadvertent camp appeal: "A very simple idea came to me, and that was to overdo it. And if you overdid it, I thought it would be funny for adults and yet would be stimulating for kids. You had to appeal on both levels to have a chance."

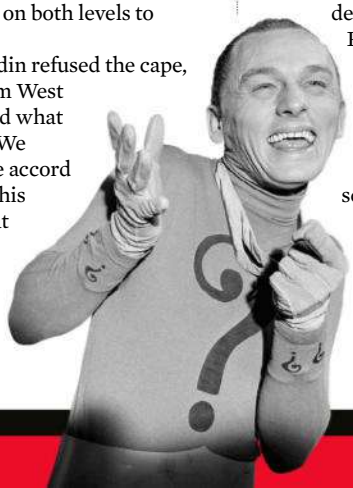
Western star Ty Hardin refused the cape, but second choice Adam West instinctively understood what Dozier was going for. "We really were of one accord and goal with this thing and what the tone was going to be," he recalled.

It was producer William Dozier's voice that topped and tailed every episode of *Batman*.

"I've always thought bigger than life." Paired with newcomer Burt Ward as a precocious, glove-thumping Boy Wonder, West's performance as the not-so-Dark Knight delivered a masterclass in deadpan irony. No wonder the eyebrows squiggled on his mask appeared permanently raised.

Opening episode "Hi Diddle Riddle" began a two-parter based on the story "Remarkable Ruse Of The Riddler" from Detective Comics 171. It showcased Frank Gorshin's electrifyingly deranged turn as the Prince of Puzzles, the first of an asylum's worth of show-stealing special guest villains. But it was the sight of West dancing the Batusi that sealed the deal for audiences.

In New York City, these episodes scored the highest ratings since the Beatles had appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Atomic batteries to power, turbines to speed... ready to move out!



ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT VIA GETTY

Coburn after applying some Lynx Africa.

20TH CENTURY FOX / ALBUMALAMY

Wowie Zowie

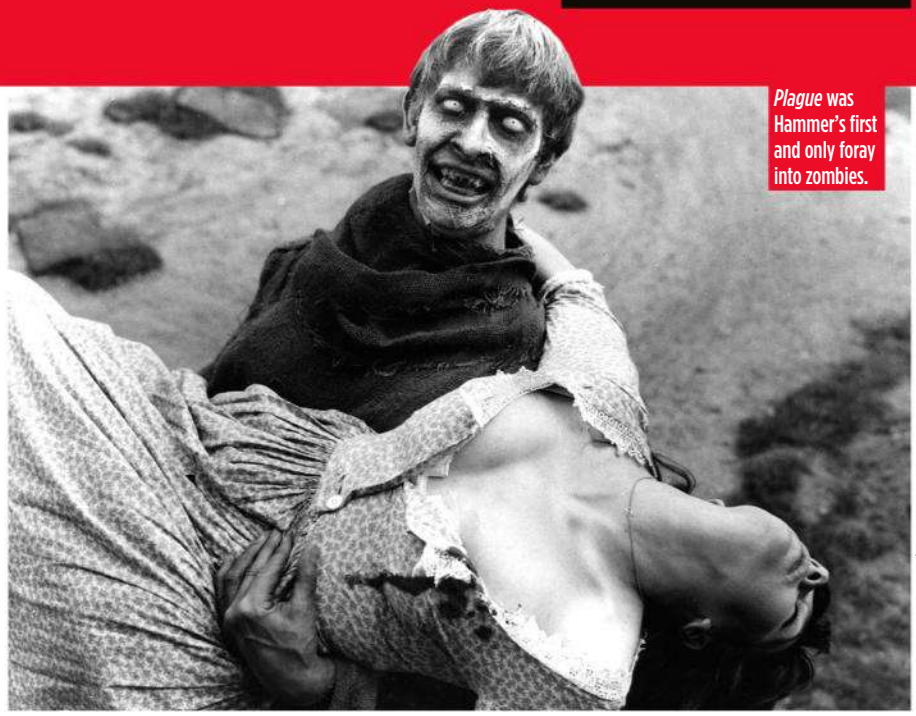
16 JANUARY 1966 "He makes love in 47 languages," boasted the poster for *Our Man Flint*, 20th Century Fox's shameless leap aboard the Bond bandwagon. "The master spy with his cigarette lighter containing 82 death-dealing devices."

Brought to the screen in the preposterously charismatic form of James Coburn – a suave, rangy presence whose mega-watt smile could light a soundstage – Derek Flint was 007 squared. Here was the grooviest of polymaths: black belt, gourmet chef, ballet dancer, war hero, painter, Olympic champion, best-selling novelist, expert frogman and master lover. As the trailer purred, "He fences for breakfast, karates for lunch, dances for dinner, kisses anytime."

Flint's first big-screen caper finds him recruited by ZOWIE (Zonal Organization World Intelligence Espionage – one of the clunkiest acronyms in the spy game) to take on a sinister cabal menacing the world with targeted weather phenomena. In a moment of supreme cheek, Flint is informed that this threat is "bigger than SPECTRE!"

"I kind of looked at it askew when I first read the script, thinking it was another James Bond," confessed Coburn, until then known as a supporting player in *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Great Escape*. But it was, he knew, "a chance to work" and bring some cool-cat mischief to the spy-fi craze.

Sequel *In Like Flint* was greenlit, but Bond's throne was safe. "Coburn, in his first starring role, is engaging and amusing as a tough spy, but I don't think Connery will have to take a back seat," said the *New York Daily News*' reviewer.



Plague was Hammer's first and only foray into zombies.

STUDIOCANAL FILMS LTD / ALAMY

Cornish And Pasty

3 JANUARY 1966 By 1966, Hammer had exhumed every horror staple from vampires to werewolves, marauding mummies to the spawn of Frankenstein. Now it was the turn of the zombie.

Traditionally, the dead had walked the Caribbean. *The Plague Of The Zombies* transposed them to 19th-century Cornwall, where a sorcerous aristocrat uses voodoo to create a shambling, blank-eyed workforce for his tin mine. It was strong meat for Hammer – what else would you expect with all that putrefying flesh? When the shooting script was submitted for approval, the British Board of Film Classification baulked at a gruesome decapitation involving multiple blows with a spade. "We will handle this with the greatest delicacy," assured producer Anthony Hinds.

The studio was tilting towards a more visceral style of horror. Hammer never returned to the genre, but *Plague*'s influence can be felt in every zombie tale that followed, beginning with George Romero's *Night Of The Living Dead*, released two years later.

Spencer Davis and pals pause from running.

SPOONER, DOREEN/MIRRORPIX/MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Harold Wilson
- **US President:** Lyndon B Johnson
- **In the charts:** The Beatles' number one "Day Tripper"/"We Can Work It Out" (a double A-side) gives way to Spencer Davis Group's "Keep On Running".
- **In the news:** Military coups take place in Nigeria, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Upper Volta; Indira Gandhi is sworn in as Prime Minister of India; Air India Flight 101 crashes into Mont Blanc, killing all 117 people on board; Action Man is launched in the UK.

ON THE SHELF

- A *Thunderbirds* comic strip arrives in issue 52 of the newly revamped, Anderson-inspired weekly *TV Century 21*, dated 15 January 1966.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

MAD SCIENTISTS

After slaving away in a lab full of bubbling beakers, we're ready to throw the switch on our latest quiz. Nothing in the world can stop us now!

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
Victor Frankenstein received a name change for James Whale's 1931 movie of *Frankenstein*... but to what?

QUESTION 2
Which '80s pop band named themselves after the mad scientist in *Barbarella*?

QUESTION 3
When he made his earliest appearance in *Action Comics*, what was markedly different about Luthor's look?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this mad scientist.

QUESTION 5
In *Day Of The Dead*, what name does Dr Logan give the zombie he's attempting to domesticate?

QUESTION 6
Who directed films such as *The Awful Dr Orloff*, *The Sinister Eyes Of Dr Orloff* and *The Sinister Dr Orloff*?

QUESTION 7
Which deadly creatures were the creation of Professor Mortimer Gangreen?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Vincent Price played numerous mad scientists – but which one is this?

QUESTION 9
Name the mad scientist – creator of the Un-Men – who was the archenemy of Swamp Thing.

QUESTION 10
In Michael Reeves's 1967 film *The Sorcerers*, what does Dr Monserrat's invention allow him and his wife to do?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
Who played Dr Cushing Catheter, who nearly dissected Gizmo in *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Supply the title missing from the poster of this mad scientist movie.

QUESTION 13
In the *Wonder Woman* comics of the '40s, what alternate identity was adopted by Princess Maru?

QUESTION 14
In HG Wells's *The Invisible Man*, what is the name of the titular character?

QUESTION 15
In the 1967 film *King Kong Escapes*, what's the strangely familiar name of the scientist who creates Mechani-Kong?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this mad scientist.

QUESTION 17
In the 1922 HP Lovecraft short story "Herbert West – Reanimator", what is the name of the medical school where West was studying?

QUESTION 18
In *Stranger Things*, what was the name of Dr Brenner's sensory-deprivation tank?

QUESTION 19
Which videogame character was known as Doctor Eggman in Japan?

QUESTION 20
Which acting role connects Michael Wisher, David Gooderson, Terry Molloy and Julian Bleach?

Answers
1 Henry Frankenstein 2 Duran Duran 3 He had a full head of red hair 4 Dr Frank-N-Furter 5 Bub 6 Jess/Jesús Franco 7 The Killer Tomatoes 8 Dr Goldfoot 9 Anton Arcane 10 Control someone and feel what they feel 11 Christopher Lee 12 *Bride Of The Monster* 13 Doctor Poison 14 Griffin 15 Dr Who 16 Professor Farnsworth 17 Miskatonic University 18 Nina 19 Doctor Robotnik (from *Sonic The Hedgehog*) 20 Davros

How did you do?

What would your invention be?

0-5
Chocolate teapot

6-10
New Coke

11-15
The Segway

16-19
Flying car

20
A universal remedy

PICTURES: FILMPUBLICITYARCHIVE/UNITED ARCHIVES VIA GETTY. CINEMATIC/ALAMY. ROLLING M. PRODUCTIONS, MATT GROENING/20TH TELEVISION/HULU/EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY. JAKEOLIMB/GETTY

SFX

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ISTOCK/GETTY

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Kathy Griffin and Vanessa Williams go head-to-head.

A Diva's Christmas Carol

Darren Scott, Editor

This TV movie might be the adaptation of Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" that you don't remember – no cheeses for these meeces here – but it's by far my favourite.

Ebony Scrooge, a former member of '80s girl group Desire, isn't here for the holiday cheer, but she'll happily use the season to sell product ("Christmas is a marketing machine we cannot ignore!"). Hmm, sounds like someone I know...

First broadcast via VH1 on 13 December 2000, this sacred knowledge and artefact (aka a USA DVD release) was passed down to me – as so many things are in our community – by a gay friend who clearly knew it was *exactly* my "bag". It had somehow passed me by for nearly a decade! So consider this a Christmas gift – if you must – from me to you. You're welcome!

Vanessa Williams is tremendous as Scrooge, a precursor to her delicious role in *Ugly Betty*, while The Ghost of Christmas Past is Kathy Griffin with her original nose. Marley is played by Chilli of girl band TLC, and John Taylor – yes, of Duran Duran – does duties for Christmas Present. Christmas Future manifests itself as something altogether more scary, if unseen, featuring a eulogy where Scrooge is more concerned at being mis-referenced as Bette Midler than being dead.

Of course, it does away with Victoriana and places things in then modern-day New York, with pop culture references and bitchy asides. It's funny, it's camp and it has musical numbers – of course I was always going to love it. It makes a very welcome change from Muppets and misplaced nostalgia.

Even though it all inevitably ends well (except for Scrooge's accountant) it still manages to bring joy to my Grinch-like heart. While I, like Ebony in her earlier incarnation, have now eschewed almost all things festive – yes, I'm still in my Kate Beringer-from-*Gremlins* era – this film is one of the few annual viewing traditions I still keep up with. Along with *Batman Returns* and *The Box Of Delights*, because I own it physically I don't have to partake in the annual farce of media-generated outrage that *Elf* fans seem to revel in when told their film has been removed from a streamer.

That said, it's outrageous that it hasn't found a new home on Paramount+, or had an anniversary Blu-ray release. Come on now Viacom, don't make us send Kathy Griffin round to visit!

Darren would like to remind you that no-one pees on the diva (unless money is exchanging hands).

Fact Attack!

- Director Richard Schenkman offered uncut versions of all the songs for a DVD release, but they turned him down. Heathens!
- VH1 made *A New Diva's Christmas Carol* in 2022. Schenkman was not asked, but Williams was offered a cameo (she declined).
- A 35mm negative of the film "exists somewhere", so it could potentially be correctly restored – unlike versions you may see online.
- VH1 made a 20-minute Making Of documentary, called "Behind The Movie". It's available to watch on Vimeo.
- A full '80s-style music video was shot for Desire's "Heartquake" single, but – along with the song – has never been released.

IMAGE © VIACOM PRODUCTIONS/VH1

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